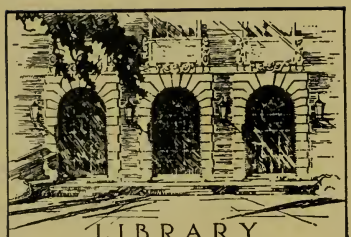
A Mere Cypher

Mary A. Dickens



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To Mother

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A MERE CYPHER

A MERE CYPHER

A Novel

BY

MARY ANGELA DICKENS

AUTHOR OF "CROSS CURRENTS."

"Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sound
Reverbs no hollowness."

IN THREE VOLUMES

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Geneva Ray 10 Fenton Mont Lake Jr.

A MERE CYPHER

CHAPTER I.

All day long, from heavy February skies, drizzling rain had fallen, and now that evening was closing in it was falling faster than ever. There was no break to be seen anywhere in the grey clouds, and daylight was giving place at least an hour before its time to that most dreary twilight which is, in part, the coming on of evening and, in part, the darkness of a rainy day.

It was only four o'clock, and to the station-master of the little station at Thornsdyke—an official whose conclusions

were adhered to with a tenacity worthy of the length of time occupied in their formation—unseemly vagaries on the part of the weather formed no good reason for any such variation in the station routine as would have been involved in the lighting of the lamps half an hour earlier than usual.

No conceivable quantity of gas, not even the brightest sunlight, could have made of the station a cheerful spot at any time; and now, in the depressing half light, it presented a most prosaic and unpicturesque picture of dreariness and desolation. It was a very small station, and it seemed to have been dropped into the midst of the surrounding country with no particular end in view—that is to say, there were no houses, not even a cottage, near at hand to suggest inhabitants to whom it might be a convenience. The

surrounding country was rather flat and bare. And the uninterrupted stretch of dripping landscape fading away in the distance into a grey blur of rain; the uninterrupted stretch of grey cloud above, which seemed to be settling lower and lower over the earth as though to shut out such light as remained, seemed to emphasize at once the insignificance and the dreariness of the poor little forlorn station with its two wet platforms, its two diminutive buildings, and its dripping signal-box.

There was not a human being to be seen. The wet platforms were deserted, the wet road which led to them was deserted too. Nor was there any one in the waiting-rooms — which were very moist inside as though their constitutions were not calculated, as indeed they were not, to with-

stand so persistent a downpour. The porter had sought refuge and companionship in the signal-box, and the station-master was revolving abstruse problems before the fire in the little den behind the ticket office. His eyes were shut.

The rain outside fell steadily and drearily, and a cold, gusty wind rose and howled round the station, and by-and-by the down train signal fell with a dull clash. The porter emerged slowly and reluctantly from the signal-box, pulling up the collar of his coat as he came, the station-master opened his eyes and appeared in the doorway, and a few minutes later the train, wet and dreary-looking like everything else, steamed slowly up.

Nobody had arrived along the road prepared to get in, and for a moment—as the porter, standing as well under cover

as might be, called out the name of the station as though he were well aware that the remark interested no one—it seemed as though there were no one to get out. Then the door of one of the first-class carriages opened, far down the train, and a young man got out.

The porter was exchanging comments on the weather—not of a benedictory nature—with the guard at the other end of the platform; and for a minute or two the solitary arrival stood still, his tall figure in its dark overcoat sharply outlined against the dreary grey background of rainy landscape behind him, looking along the platform in the gloomy light to where the grey landscape opened out again, as though uncertain what to do. Then he shifted the rug he had flung over his arm into a more manageable position and began to

walk up the platform, hailing the porter as he moved.

"Portmanteau in the front van; brown; name, Strange," he said laconically, as that functionary, having covered the space between them in so short a space of time as was only to be accounted for by his intense astonishment at the sudden appearance of so unexpected a phenomenon as a first-class passenger, stood touching his cap before him. And the lad turned away in search of the luggage thus described, with a mental comment drawn forth by something indescribable in the solitary traveller's voice and manner.

"A real gentleman, too! Had ought to have been met, I reckon."

He turned his head, partly to take another look at the real gentleman, and partly to look along the deserted road for

the carriage which, as he expressed it, "had ought" to have met him, and added to himself: "Why don't he go under cover, instead o' standing there? Seems like as though he didn't know it was raining!" Then with a grin at his own pleasantry, Tom Wilson, commonly known in the village as "Tom-at-the-station," dived energetically into the luggage van.

But, indeed, his last comment on the new-comer was by no means unreasonable. A few yards from where the latter stood the open door of the waiting-room offered a certain amount of shelter, at least, from the rain, but the traveller remained where the porter had left him, his rug still over his arm, his hat pulled rather forward over his forehead, as if quite unconscious of his own discomfort. He had not even looked round to see if shelter was within reach,

and he was still standing motionless, his dark overcoat shining with the fast-falling raindrops, when "Tom-at-the-station," with the brown portmanteau over his shoulder, returned to him with increased alacrity.

"There comes the carriage, sir!" he announced cheerily, indicating the road along which a dogcart, still at some distance, was advancing rapidly. "You're for the Castle, sir, o' course? It's the Castle dogcart, sir!"

The traveller started and turned instinctively, apparently to look in the direction indicated.

"The Castle!" he said quickly, almost roughly. "No, no! I'm not for the Castle." He paused, and then as though movement and speech had waked him to full consciousness, he said: "There is no one here to meet me then, I suppose? No one from Dr. Custance?"

There was something rather strange about the manner in which the last words were spoken. The traveller's voice, which was young and pleasant, became a trifle hard and constrained as he spoke them with a somewhat overdone assumption of unconcern, and the effect of the words themselves upon the porter was no less perceptible. "Tom-at-the-station" withdrew his eyes suddenly from the advancing dog-cart and fixed them on the figure by his side with as much change of expression as his face was capable of.

"Dr. Custance?" he said. "Oh, you're for Dr. Custance's, sir?"

"I said so, didn't I?" was the response, given with a sudden flash of anger as hot as it was apparently unprovoked. "Now, what's my best way to get there? I don't want to stay here all night! I suppose

there's no way of getting a conveyance in this confounded hole?"

By this time Tom had become aware that his superior was watching the colloquy with a slow curiosity from the door of the waiting-room, and motives of policy urged him to share the interest of the position. His expression showed that it was a keen interest.

"You'd better speak to the station-master, sir," he said, with a glance at the portly form in the narrow doorway. "Mr. Moore, he'll know what you'd ought to do."

The young man turned as though to put the suggestion into effect, and then he stopped suddenly and, turning away from both porter and station-master, stooped down to turn up his trousers. "You can ask him," he said, and Tom, without

waiting for a second bidding, moved hastily away with the alacrity of one who has news to impart.

He had just made his communication in a gruff whisper, as though some motive of delicacy made him desirous that it should not reach the ears of the traveller, when the advancing dogcart was pulled up suddenly at the station gate, and putting the brown portmanteau hastily down in the waiting-room he hurried out to meet it, leaving the traveller and the station-master alone together. There was a moment's pause. The young man, to whose ears two words of "Tom-at-the-station's" whisper had penetrated—"the doctor's"—was standing, again apparently with no consciousness of the rain which was being dashed against him now by a sudden gust of wind, his back to the

waiting-room door, and as much as could be seen of his face between the coat collar he had pulled up and the hat he had pulled down, white and set. The station-master, a man of mind, according to his fellow-villagers, was also a man of deliberation, and a minute or two elapsed before he said, as though he were advancing an incontrovertible discovery of his own :

"You're for the doctor's ?"

"Yes."

"They ain't met you ?"

"No."

The monosyllabic answers were given in a restrained tone which seemed to indicate that the temper which had flashed out upon Tom Wilson was only under temporary control ; and the negative was followed by a silence. The silence was

broken by "Tom-at-the-station," returned as hastily as he had departed.

"It's Mr. Edward!" he said, addressing his superior, with a backward glance to where a good-looking young man on the box-seat of the dogcart was restraining the impatience of the horse whilst the groom made some arrangements behind. "He's driven down for that there box from London. How'd it be to tell him as how they haven't met the gentleman? He'll pass the doctor's on his way, and I reckon he'd save the gentleman the five miles' walk, such a night as this."

Tom had lowered his voice and put up a rough hand as a shield to his words, with a side-glance at the straight back of the traveller, as he made the suggestion tentatively enough; but before he could receive from the station-master the rebuke

he evidently half expected, the young man had turned suddenly upon him.

"You will do no such thing!" he said, almost fiercely. "I prefer to walk." He looked for an instant toward the cheery young fellow on the dogcart, and then drew suddenly back out of the line of sight as though anxious to avoid any possibility of such an invitation as Tom Wilson had suggested for him.

Station-master and porter alike contemplated him with open-mouthed astonishment, broken in upon the next instant by sounds of departure from the dogcart, and, that interlude over, they were free once more to concentrate upon him their undivided attention. The train which had brought the stranger had steamed slowly on its way some minutes earlier, the dogcart, taking a sharp turn, disappeared from

sight, and the little station resumed its previous appearance of dreary, dripping quiet, but for the little group of men that now stood on the platform. The station-master and his assistant did not apparently find themselves prepared to offer any further suggestions or to do anything but gaze curiously at the young man in the dark overcoat, and after a moment's pause the silence was broken by the latter.

"Which is my best way?" he enquired tersely.

"You'll find it a good step, sir."

"Which is the best way?"

"Well," began the station-master impressively, and then, apparently considering that the directions he was prepared to give would be too weighty for the mental capacity of the recipient, he turned to his subordinate and said: "Tom, you just take

the gentleman to the gate and put him in the way to the doctor's."

Almost before the last word was uttered the traveller had turned and was walking down the platform to the little wicket-gate, and Tom, with another tug at the collar of his coat for some protection against the rain, followed him hastily. The directions as given by him were neither long nor complicated.

"It's pretty straight nigh all the way, your road, sir," he finished. "But it's a bad road an' no mistake—particular towards the end."

The young man laughed—a low, harsh laugh.

"So I've heard," he said, and "Tom-at-the-station" wished that his face was not so invisible between the dim light, his coat collar, and his hat. "So I've

heard. Thanks; good evening!" And he was striding out on to the muddy apology for a path when Tom Wilson stopped him.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, "but won't you leave your rug and have it sent up with the luggage?"

Pulling up suddenly and glancing down at his arm, the young man seemed to become aware for the first time that he still carried his heavy rug.

"Thanks!" he said, as he gave it into Tom Wilson's hands, and then his hand went into his waistcoat pocket and out again towards Tom. "Good night, my man," he said, in the pleasant tone in which he had first spoken, and which had elicited the porter's first approving comment.

"Thank ye, sir. Good night to you!"

responded "Tom - at - the - station." He lingered a minute or two, in spite of the rain, watching the receding figure, and then he turned and ran back to where the station-master still stood in the waiting-room doorway. He did not return to his refuge in the signal-box. Apparently a common subject of interest had arisen between him and his superior, for they disappeared together into the warm little fire-lighted den behind the ticket office, and the little wet platforms lay once more wet and deserted in the fast-falling rain and the fading light.

CHAPTER II.

The rain was blown in his face by the wind, the puddles through which he passed splashed up round him as the quick drops pattered in them, but the young man kept on his way with no more apparent consciousness of the active discomforts of his present position than he had shown in his passivity on the platform. Out in the open with the straight road stretching in front, and a rain-blurred expanse of country on either side; with a cold wind howling and shuddering in the few creaking, swaying trees; with twilight closing in with every moment—the dreariness was indescribable.

But the young man strode along, never varying his heavy, regular movement, never moving his hands from the pockets into which he had thrust them, looking neither to the right nor to the left. He had covered three miles in the same heavy absorption, when the road before him suddenly branched off to right and left, and he pulled up abruptly.

"Right or left?" he said to himself. "Which did the fellow say? Wasn't I attending, or—memory going, I suppose."

By this time it was nearly dusk, and though, as he stood there looking keenly along each of the roads before him, certain words spoken by "Tom-at-the-station" concerning landmarks came back to him, it was impossible to distinguish any object that was not in the immediate foreground.

"Confound it all!" he said to himself,

as he gazed at the two roads before him, and back at the one along which he had come, in a perplexity which their appearance in no way helped to lighten. "What am I to do? The village must be somewhere near. I suppose I must go on till I meet some one or come to a cottage. Hullo!"

He was moving slowly forward with a backward glance over his shoulder when he uttered his concluding exclamation and stood still again. Coming towards him through the dusk, slouching through the mud and rain with heavy, tired footsteps, was a man with a carpenter's basket slung over his shoulder, and turning towards him the traveller stood waiting, evidently intending to ask his way. Nearer and nearer came the footsteps; the man came up to him, cast on him the dull, uninterested glance of the unintelligent countryman, and

passed on; passed on unquestioned. The question the traveller had waited to put found no utterance when the time for words came, and the slouching footsteps dying away in the distance left him once more alone with his perplexity. They had quite died away before he moved, and, pushing his hat from his forehead for a moment with a strangely despairing gesture, only to pull it further over his forehead again, he strode suddenly forward, choosing his road evidently at random and taking that to the right.

Half an hour more passed and he was still striding along an apparently endless road, by this time in nearly total darkness, when he stopped again and turned his head as if to listen. "What a fool I was!" he said to himself bitterly. "Why couldn't I ask the fellow?" He listened

again. "Wheels!" he said to himself. "Now, Norman Strange, no more confounded humbug!"

He drew back to the side of the road and stood there, with his hands thrust once more into his pockets, as the lamp of what seemed to be a spring-cart appeared round a turn of the road and came nearer and nearer at a good round pace, the wheels and the tread of the horse making a swishing sound in the mud. It was still some yards distant from him when he called out:

"Hullo, there! Is this the road to Thornsdyke village?"

There was no answer. The lights came on until they were close to him; then they stopped, and a clear, strong girl's voice called back as a gust of wind caught the trees near and howled wildly through them:

"What part of the village do you want?"

It was a light spring-cart, and the young man could see, now that they were close to him, that its only occupants were two women. They were cloaked and waterproofed until it was impossible to judge of their figures, but as the young man, lifting his hat, stepped forward hastily, the light from the lamp fell on the face of the one who was driving. It was the face of a singularly handsome girl, so brilliant in colouring, with its bright complexion, luxuriant, reddish brown hair, and large, brilliant dark eyes as to be almost startling, set in such sombre surroundings.

"Where are you going to?" she demanded peremptorily, and her accent and tone, like her beauty, were essentially of the people.

"Pardon me for stopping you!" he said. "I have walked from the station, and I must have missed my way, I think. Can you tell me the way to Dr. Custance's house?"

Again, evidently in spite of himself, his tone altered as he spoke the last words, and as it had come to the porter's face and manner, so a change came to the face and manner of the girl whose flashing black eyes were fixed now upon the figure before her —soaked by this time through and through.

"Dr. Custance!" she repeated. "Oh!" She paused and looked him curiously up and down as though she would have liked, as the porter would have liked, to see the face so obstinately concealed. "You're not far," she continued. "Take the first turning to your right and you'll come to the house in a few minutes. It's about a mile."

"Thank you."

Not raising his face to her as he did it, the young man stepped back to let the cart go on its way. But the girl had caught a glimpse of a white, good-looking young face. With a slight glance at her companion — a much older woman — she said quickly:

"Won't you have a lift? We're passing the house, and it's a poor night for walking."

"Thanks, no. I prefer to walk."

He lifted his hat again and turned to proceed on his way as the girl, with an injured toss at once of her head and the reins she held, put the pony she drove into its former sober trot. The young man did not hear her comment to her companion as the cart passed him, nor did he hear the response:

"Just come down!"

"Poor young fellow!"

He fell once more into his heavy, regular stride, and ten minutes later he had groped his way through a garden gate that seemed as it swung back to do so on but one hinge, had passed between dripping, sighing trees up to a house with a light in one of the lower windows only, and was ringing the bell.

There was no response to his first peal. He heard the sound of the bell reverberate apparently in empty premises and die away into silence; he waited a minute or two and then he rang again. This time sounds in the house followed, and a moment later the door was opened by a rather untidy maid-servant.

"I am Mr. Strange," said the young man, in a hard, constrained tone, moving

past her as he spoke into the dimly-lighted little hall. "Is Dr. Custance in?"

Apparently the house was not remarkable for the thickness of its walls for, as he asked the question, a door at the end of the hall opened quickly, and a tall, fair man came out hastily.

"Mr. Strange!" he exclaimed. "I had no expectation of seeing you to-night. I am delighted! My dear fellow," he added, as he shook hands with his visitor with a warmth which found no response in the young man's hand-clasp, "my dear fellow, you are wet through! Is it possible that you have walked from the station? Come to the fire in my smoking-room and let me understand how such a wretched misunderstanding has come about. I am more sorry than I can say!"

"The fault was mine, no doubt!" returned

the young man courteously, though his voice was hard and constrained. "Thanks, if you don't mind I think I will go to my room at once and get rid of these wet things."

Dr. Custance turned to the servant who was still standing by.

"Is Mr. Strange's room ready, Ellen?" he said. "You know, the one at the end of the passage—next to Mr. Caton's."

"There ain't no bed made up," was the response given, with a mixture of confusion and alacrity. "Nor no water, nor nothing, but——"

"Take up what is wanted at once," returned her master; "and bring a lamp, quickly. Or, stay, I will take this," lifting an oil lamp from the hall table as he spoke. "This way, Mr. Strange, please."

He led the way up a staircase, as dimly lighted as was the hall, and the young man

followed him along a passage until he opened a door.

"This is your room," he said. "I am so sorry it is not more comfortably prepared to receive you. I suppose the post office is at the bottom of the mistake?"

"My letter must have missed the post," answered the young man in the same constrained tone—a tone that contrasted strangely with the easy pleasantness of his host. "I wrote to you yesterday, but"—he paused a moment—"I was late, I know, in posting it."

Dr. Custance received the explanation with a smile.

"Well, the only thing to be done is to make you as comfortable as possible now that you are here," he said. "What can I lend you? We are much of a size, are we not?"

They faced one another on the words, and, as though glad, each in a different way, to take advantage of the opportunity, looked one another over; the elder man with keen curiosity, the younger with a heavy, almost painful, momentary interest. They were, as Dr. Custance had said, almost exactly the same height, but the differences between them in breadth and build were very marked. Dr. Custance was a man apparently of about five-and-forty, rather broad in build, and with a certain looseness and absence of sharp outline about him that suggested an inactive life. His face was very handsome; long in shape, with admirably cut features and rather indolent grey eyes. The mouth was hidden by a long, fair moustache. The younger man, now that he was divested of his dark overcoat, was an active, well-

made figure, with a capital carriage, but rather too thin. The hands, too — strong, nervous-looking hands—were thinner than a young man's hands should be, and his face was absolutely haggard. His hair was dark, and the contrast seemed to heighten his extreme pallor; his eyes, sunken now, and with heavy shadows beneath them, were dark, too. He wore neither beard nor moustache, and his features were rather irregular. It was a good face, however, in spite of the expression of heavy, almost sullen, stiffness and self-restraint. It sat oddly and most unnaturally upon it, and seemed to battle all the time with something in his eyes which was, or might have been if he had allowed himself expression, something strangely pitiful.

The battle of expression went on in the new-comer's face during all his host's

offers of dry clothes, during all the little stir and movement attending the production by the agitated maid of the various toilet necessaries, and it was going on still when Dr. Custance, telling him that supper would be ready at half-past eight, finally shut the door and left him.

He stood for a moment motionless, looking towards the door as though realising the fact that he was alone; and then his eyes wandered slowly round the room—a bare and rather dingy room which the servant's hurried efforts had failed to make either comfortable or attractive. His glance rested for a moment on the dreary paper, the worn carpet, the shabby, scanty furniture, the empty grate, without apparently taking in anything that he saw. Then he walked in a mechanical, preoccupied way across the room, as though to lay something down on the table there. He stood

still and put out his hand, and then quite suddenly he dropped heavily into a chair that stood by, and, laying his arms on the table, let his head fall forward on them with a low, despairing groan. Time passed on, and still he sat there motionless, his face buried in his arms. Nearly an hour had gone by when the sound of a bell ringing downstairs startled him suddenly to his feet, and, as he moved, the expression of misery, which softened his face and made it most pathetic and attractive, changed suddenly into a hard, fierce recklessness, which altered the whole man indescribably for the worse. Such changes in his dress as were absolutely necessary he made hastily and roughly, but he did nothing further, and his whole appearance as he laid his hand on the door was strangely uncared for and disorderly. He caught sight of

himself in the looking-glass as he turned to leave the room, and his mouth grew harder and more bitterly reckless.

"What does it matter?" he muttered to himself. "What does anything matter, now?"

He opened the door and went rapidly downstairs, pausing as he reached the bottom as if in uncertainty. Then he caught sight of an open door leading into a lighted room and went towards it. He passed across the threshold and stopped short.

It was a drawing-room, small and not particularly well or tastefully furnished, but looking in the warm light of a bright little fire and shaded lamp very pretty and comfortable. There was a piano at the further end, several little feminine odds and ends were strewn about, and on a low chair near the fire, her back towards the young man as he stood in the doorway, sat a lady.

For a second or two the young man hesitated, and the reckless hardness of his face was touched by a mixed expression of astonishment and annoyance. Then he came slowly into the room, and at the sound of his footstep the lady turned with a nervous start and rose hastily.

"How do you do?" she said, holding out her hand nervously.

With the ready, deferential courtesy of a well-bred man, which sat oddly upon his disorderly figure, the young man shook hands with her and made the conventional response in a manner in which the natural instinct of the man seemed to break through the hard, almost sullen constraint which had grown upon him with every moment that had passed since his arrival.

The lady before him was a little woman, dressed in an old black silk dress that was

neither fashionable nor becoming. She had a small, worn, faded face, which might once have been pretty, but which in losing its girlishness had gained nothing in character or intelligence. There was no trace of youthfulness about it, but neither were there any of the usual signs of age—no wrinkles, no crowsfeet, no grey in the smooth brown hair which was drawn plainly off her face and knotted behind with scrupulous neatness, but after a fashion that suggested a total absence of consideration of any other effect in the wearer's mind. Her figure, though the dress she wore effectually disguised the fact, was slight and undeveloped as that of a young girl. The blue eyes which she lifted to the young man's face as he spoke to her were so ill-assured as to be almost frightened, and her manner was equally ill-assured as she continued:

"My husband will be back directly. He was here a moment ago. Won't you—won't you sit down?"

"I am hardly fit to sit down in a lady's drawing-room, Mrs. Custance," answered the young man, regarding himself with frank disapprobation. He spoke very pleasantly and courteously, and with a smile, as though he was altogether surprised out of the mood in which he had left his bedroom; and any one who had seen him in both phases would have realised that this was the man in his normal condition. The sullenness and the recklessness had alike disappeared completely, displaced, apparently, by the impulse of courtesy to a lady, obviously innate, and so suddenly and apparently unexpectedly called upon; and his face was very attractive under its present aspect. The last words were evidently spoken at a venture, and he con-

tinued quickly: "I do hope you will excuse me. I had no idea—I mean I did not know—Dr. Custance has always taken it for granted that I knew he was married. I am afraid I have kept you waiting in the first place, and in the second, I am not fit to be seen."

Mrs. Custance was apparently not prepared for such an apology. The blue eyes, which were neither quick-looking nor intelligent, glanced at the young man with a slow surprise, and she murmured something incoherent as she subsided into her chair.

"I hope my unannounced arrival this evening is not inconvenient?" went on the young man, as he followed her example and sat down.

"Not at all," she responded hastily and deprecatingly. "I—I am sorry I was out." There was a moment's pause, during which

the blue eyes furtively scanned the face before them, and then she spoke again, evidently with a nervous consciousness that she ought to say something, and a nervous incapacity for thinking of the right thing to say.

"I am so sorry you have to wait for supper," she faltered; "Dr. Custance will be here in a moment. He—Mr. Caton is not well, I believe."

She coloured very faintly as she spoke, and the young man suddenly flushed to the roots of his thick, dark hair a deep, painful scarlet. There was another pause — an awkward one this time apparently—and then the silence was broken by the voice of Dr. Custance as he came quickly into the room.

"So sorry to keep you waiting!" he said. "Shall we go in to supper?"

His wife rose hurriedly and moved towards the door in silence; and the young man, with the natural, easy impulse of a gentleman, held it for her to pass out. As she did so she lifted her eyes to him again with the same vague surprise with which she had received his apology.

CHAPTER III.

THE house which was known in Thornsdyke village as "the doctor's," was a large and rambling building which might possibly, from its appearance, have started in life as a cottage, and developed by degrees to its present dimensions, or which might have been originally the substantial farmhouse of well-to-do farmers. It did not look particularly substantial now, nor did it look as though its present tenants were particularly well-to-do. Its white plaster surface was much discoloured, in many places in actual need of repair; and there was a pervading air of dilapidation of

which the details were slight enough in themselves, while the whole effect was singularly depressing.

The best-kept of country houses could hardly have looked anything but depressing on the morning following the unexpected arrival of "the doctor's" guest. The rain had stopped indeed, but only recently, and nature seemed to be in a momentarily quiescent state ; pausing, as it were, all dripping and heavy, before passing into another and brighter state of activity. The dull grey clouds still hung over the earth, and beneath them everything had a watery, almost sodden appearance.

The garden surrounding the doctor's house, as neglected as the house itself, looked particularly dreary under these circumstances. Its principal feature was an uncared-for lawn, surrounded on two sides by untidy

flower-beds, and on the other two by an equally untidy gravel path.

At the end of this path, at about nine o'clock on the morning after his arrival, stood the doctor's guest.

It was nearly an hour since he had come out of the house to wander restlessly about, and he had come to a standstill at last, his face expressing perfect fellowship with the dreariness, atmospheric and actual, before him. His eyes passed slowly from the barren landscape to the neglected garden; from thence to the dilapidated house; and there, in the window of the dining-room, a long window on a level with the path, he saw his hostess, a small, ungraceful figure, no inharmonious element in the picture, in its dull drab gown. No such change as the unexpected presence of a lady had brought to his face on the previous evening came to

it now, but he made an obvious effort, unsuccessful enough, to lighten its expression as he lifted his hat to her courteously. The bow with which she returned his acknowledgment of her presence in the window was hurried and nervous, as though she had not been prepared for such a necessity as she stood there watching him. She was evidently waiting breakfast for him, and he moved quickly, though with none of the elasticity that the step of so young a man should have possessed, towards the house.

Three years before Norman Strange had taken a good degree and left the University one of the most popular men of his college; a cheery, impulsive, generous-hearted young fellow. He had had his full share of the wide and somewhat quixotic views of life, the fixed, and — to their originators—unalterable opinions, the am-

bition at once high-minded and impracticable, which should characterise youth. He had numbers of friends, with all of whom he was on the same genial terms of good-fellowship to the exclusion of any one intimate friendship; but he was singularly poor in relations. He had neither brother nor sister, his father and mother had died in his boyhood, and his guardian during his minority had been his mother's only brother. Of his father's relations, the only two remaining were elderly unmarried ladies, possessed of considerable wealth, and living very quietly in the Lake district. Between these ladies and his guardian there was a feud of long standing, and Norman Strange in consequence knew little of his aunts. His uncle, Mr. Kingdon, was a bachelor and a prominent Q.C., a man with few sympathies, on whose original hard and narrow severity, an extended professional

acquaintance with the weakness and wickedness of human nature had had no softening effect. He had seen little of his nephew and ward during his boyhood, and when the latter finally came to London to start in life there was no affection between the two, hardly even familiarity; nothing but respect, and a chilly sense of distance on the young man's part, and a certain cold interest on that of his uncle.

More by reason of his uncle's tacit assumption that such was his obvious destiny, than through any natural aptitude of his own, Norman Strange was entered at the Temple. The law seemed to him as good a field as any other; a distinguished Q.C. or a learned judge having apparently as many opportunities as most men for benefiting his fellowmen. If he could not candidly assert that the entire bar and bench took advantage of these

opportunities, of course there was no doubt in his mind that he himself would do so. He established himself in very desirable bachelor quarters and applied himself with enthusiasm to the study of the law.

He was a very good-looking young man in those days, far better-looking than the thin, haggard Norman Strange who arrived at Thornsdyke on that February evening. There was a dash and fire about him that was even more attractive than regularity of feature. His manner was excellent. His uncle had taken care that his social as well as his intellectual education should be of the best kind, and the result on a temperament naturally chivalrous and refined was the production of a very finished gentleman in the best sense of the word. Such introductions as his University connection left still to be desired, his uncle, a man of the

world himself, and keenly appreciative of the advantages to a young man of a footing in society, supplied to him. He was universally popular, and went about a great deal, combining work and play with inexhaustible energy.

Nearly two years passed, and then Norman Strange developed a fit of excessive studiousness. He refused all invitations, shut himself up in his chambers, and worked at his profession with feverish energy. The attack was the first visible effect upon his ardent and uncompromising youth of a gradual realisation of the heavy drudgery involved in legal study for a mind with no special aptitude for it; and it was followed by the inevitable reaction. Having overworked himself considerably he took a complete holiday, and he took it in the wrong company. There was a set of young men

with whom he had just kept in touch after a slight college acquaintance, but whose gaieties he had rather avoided as being "too rapid for a working man," as he explained. During a holiday, however, with the general slackening of moral tension involved in such a proceeding, and the vague desire to forget his distaste to the work to which he must eventually return, he saw no reason against accepting any invitation he received. In the set into which he went thus as part of the general change and relaxation of his holiday, it was "the thing" to drink a great deal more champagne and a great deal more whisky than had ever been the custom with Norman Strange, and the latter, doing at Rome as the Romans did, found the effect very satisfactory in its stimulus of spirits and energies really rather jaded by overwork, and in the freedom it involved from that

constant worrying doubt as to his suitability to his profession. He grew to look forward to and to count upon the exhilaration common in a greater or less degree to all the members of his new set after a dinner or supper. He had been excited, quarrelsome, incoherent again and again—phases to which his present companions were well accustomed in one another—when at last the climax came.

A dinner was given, by one of the set, from which Norman Strange rose something more than excited. He had an engagement for a dance, at which he expected to meet a girl a little flirtation with whom had formed another feature of his holiday, and in spite of the laughing advice of a friend more self-possessed than himself, he insisted on departing forthwith in a hansom to keep it. The drive or an instinctive sense of absolute necessity

steadied him to some extent, and he presented himself to his hostess to all outward appearances his usual self. He found the girl he had come to meet, exchanged greetings with her, asked and was promised a dance, and was holding out his hand for her programme when she suddenly drew it back.

"I — I'm afraid my card is full," she faltered, and then as a partner came up to claim her, she turned away hastily without another word or glance.

With the half-stupid consciousness that she had "noticed something," ashamed without knowing why, there came to Norman Strange the instinct to pull himself together, and he went down to the supper-room. Half an hour later and he was still there, but by that time he was drunk, noisily, horribly drunk, and the

men-servants of the house were doing their best to get him quietly out of the room.

The house was one to which his uncle had introduced him, one of the most popular centres of a good "set." When Norman Strange woke from his drunken sleep next day, he woke to the consciousness that his fall was known to, at least, half his acquaintance, and upon his agony of despair and self-loathing came a peremptory summons from his uncle. He obeyed it mechanically, to hear from that gentleman, who had himself been one of the witnesses of the scene of the previous evening, a short, stern speech delivered without the faintest touch of pity or tenderness, to the effect that he had disgraced himself beyond retrieval, and that nothing remained for him but to go abroad for

a time immediately, previously sending an abject apology to his insulted hostess. The early part of the speech was as the voice of doom itself to the wretched young fellow, who listened, standing with his head bent, his face ashen, trembling from head to foot. It formulated his own conviction. The latter part he hardly seemed to hear. He turned away, on a dry contemptuous dismissal, without a word and went back to his chambers.

He had tried his strength severely by his course of overwork, and his subsequent course of dissipation had not tended to restore it. Physical weakness reacted upon his mental force, and he was utterly powerless to bear up against the intolerable sense of shame that crushed him to the earth.

During the two months that followed

he hardly left his rooms; he saw nobody, he did no work. Humiliated and degraded already in his own eyes beyond all hope of redemption, it mattered nothing to him in his despair how much farther he fell. He had even a kind of bitter satisfaction in each fresh proof of his own worthlessness. He drank, not wildly or desperately, but with a heavy carelessness of consequences and a miserable longing for forgetfulness—the only good life any longer held for him.

After rather more than two months had passed, his uncle, who had taken it for granted that his advice as to the advisability of leaving the country, had been followed, found out his mistake. He heard through a servant a highly-coloured account of his nephew's present life in all its vice and none of its misery. It was an account which,

to a man of his temperament — cold and irreproachable—was inexpressibly disgusting; as given of a young man for whom he was to some extent responsible, it was a keen humiliation.

He went to his nephew's chambers, and what he found there—Norman at his very worst—was not calculated to soften his cold anger and contempt. "The boy" had "gone to the devil," he told himself, and there was nothing to be done but to keep the disgraceful fact as quiet as possible. Accordingly, a day or two later he had another interview with his nephew—the latter sober this time, but silent with the sullenness of absolute despair—in which he half proposed, half commanded, that he should leave London and live "for the present," as he put it drily, in the house of a certain Dr. Custance, of whom Mr. Kingdon had

heard through a client. Little was said about this Dr. Custance by Mr. Kingdon, except that his references and terms were satisfactory, and that he was in the habit of receiving dipsomaniacs. It was tacitly understood by both uncle and nephew that the idea of cure or reformation—whichever word might be most applicable—was nominal only, and that the words used by Mr. Kingdon—"you will put yourself under the care of Dr. Custance"—were a mere phrase; and Norman Strange had assented heavily to the proposal, as though nothing was any longer of consequence. Six months before his life had been all before him, bright and full of promise. Now it was as though a heavy pall had descended upon it. Energy was dead, hope was dead, self-respect was dead, and with these had gone all that made life worth living.

As he stood in Dr. Custance's garden on that February morning his only hope was that that life itself might soon be taken from him.

CHAPTER IV.

THERE was the same heavy restraint on his face, and it was little less white than it had been the night before, when he entered the dining-room where breakfast was waiting.

"I am afraid I have kept you waiting again," he said to Mrs. Custance, as she turned hastily from the window on his entrance.

There was none of that reversion to his old self which had been produced by his surprise at his first meeting with his hostess on the previous evening, but his grave, toneless voice and reserved manner

were perfectly courteous. Then, as Mrs. Custance, deprecating his apology to herself with a nervous murmur, glanced towards her husband as he stood before the fire, he added to the latter a formal "Good morning."

The making of small talk was no slight effort to Norman in his present state, and he was heavily conscious of something wrong in the breakfast-table conversation that followed — something that suggested that the trio who should have been engaged in it were entirely unable to strike a common chord. His remarks to his hostess seemed to embarrass her. She replied in monosyllables only, with nervous glances at her husband. Dr. Custance was ready enough to talk, but Norman's instincts of courtesy forbade the total ignoring of the wife apparently involved in conversation with the husband. Dr. and Mrs. Custance and

Norman Strange completed the party. The other inmate—the resources of the White House enabled Dr. Custance to receive only two—the Mr. Caton, to whose indisposition Mrs. Custance had alluded on the previous evening, was, presumably, not sufficiently recovered to appear at breakfast.

It was a relief to Norman when breakfast was over and Dr. Custance rose. The next moment he was wondering wearily what he should do, when that gentleman looked round from a cursory inspection of the weather, and said easily:

"We must have a little interview by-and-by, Mr. Strange. If you would like a cigar will you go to the smoking-room now? —you know the way—and I'll come to you there in a few minutes."

Norman Strange flushed hotly—the deep, painful scarlet of the night before—and he

glanced instinctively towards Mrs. Custance, who had just risen from her chair. He could not see her face, and he answered evidently at random in a low, hurried voice, in which there was a tone that was almost reproof, and, turning away, left the room.

In the hall outside, with the door closed behind him, he paused for a moment irresolute. He had nowhere definite to go, nothing definite to do. He might as well smoke, he told himself, as anything else.

He moved listlessly along the winding, uneven passage that led to the smoking-room, opened the door, and went in. Dr. Custance had shown him the room with the rest of the house on the night before, but he had hardly looked at it then. Now, glancing round it, he saw that it was a small room, comfortable looking, though everything in it was more or less shabby. There was a long

wicker chair, plentifully supplied with shabby cushions, at right angles with the fireplace, in which a bright fire was burning. There were several other luxurious-looking chairs, and Norman Strange let himself sink into one of these and slowly took out his cigar-case. He lit his cigar and began to smoke, letting his head fall back against the cushions of his chair.

His most prominent sensation, during the first reposeful moments following on the painful strain of breakfast, was one of physical lassitude. On the previous night, almost for the first time for two months, he had gone to bed sober, and he was missing in every fibre the stimulant to which he was accustomed. But after a few moments, from his sense of physical discomfort and his realisation of its cause, his thoughts, vague and indefinite enough, and becoming not less

so as he smoked and they drifted, passed to what had induced that cause.

He had been inexpressibly taken by surprise by the presence of a lady in Dr. Custance's house. For two months he had not spoken to a lady; he had come down to Thornsdyke prepared to shut himself up in a bachelor household, where in the society of the fellow "patient" he should find company for which he was fit, as he told himself bitterly; where no depths of degradation to which he might sink would cause surprise or disgust; and where the end might come to him when and how fate would. The presence of Dr. Custance's wife was a factor on which he had not calculated, and the current of his reckless self-abandonment had been, for the moment, arrested on the night before by the unexpectedness of the circumstances in which he found himself. Short as had

been the evening before he went to his room —perhaps because it had been so short, and the first impression of a womanly atmosphere was still so strong upon him—its influence had held him fast. He could not drink—he could not "make a beast of himself so soon," he had muttered to himself; there was a lady under the same roof; how near him she might be he could not tell, and he could not do it.

He sat on now smoking, and his thoughts, from a vague, indefinite consideration of the night before, gradually narrowed and focussed themselves round the actual woman in question. He had no definite impressions with regard to Mrs. Custance. Even her personal appearance was not very distinct to him. Considering her now, carelessly enough, he decided that she was a very nervous little woman, and perhaps not particularly intelligent.

"It must be a dull enough life down here to stupefy any one," he said to himself, thinking for the first time for weeks of something unconnected with himself; and then remembering certain little significant signs and tokens in her manner of receiving his attention which seemed to imply that Mrs. Custance was not used to such courteous respect as came naturally from him to a lady and his hostess, he thought to himself how soon men living out of the world grow careless with women; and suddenly his face flamed again as it had done on Dr. Custance's speech about their interview after breakfast.

"Before his wife!" he muttered to himself. "How could he?"

The thought recalled him indirectly to himself and his own affairs, and his mind turned to the interview before him. He

had finished his cigar, and his expression, which had softened slightly under the influence of physical weariness and impersonal meditation, grew harder and heavier moment by moment. A touch on the handle of the door made him lift to it a pair of eyes that were at once sullen and desperate, and the next moment he had risen to his feet with a face which he rendered suddenly, by a strong effort of self-control, perfectly impassive. Mrs. Custance was standing hesitating in the doorway.

"I beg your pardon," she said, "my husband wishes me to say how sorry he is that he can't see you just now. He is obliged to—to go out. He will see you when he comes in, he says."

She said the rather unnecessary last words evidently with the irresistible impulse natural to some people to repeat

words that are painful or difficult to utter. She had coloured faintly, and she was painfully embarrassed by her obvious consciousness of the object of the postponed interview. It was evidently no want of consideration but sheer nervousness that made her, after letting her eyes wander round the room as she spoke, finally fix them on his face.

"Thank you," he said, "it is most kind of you to take this trouble!"

She made no direct response, though she paused a moment, uncertainly, as though feeling that she ought to do or say something. Then she said hurriedly:

"My husband told me to take you to see the village—if you would care to go. He may not be in until late this afternoon, and he thought you might be dull. If you would care to go with me——"

She stopped. There had been something curiously humble and self-depreciating in her shy tone which turned the polite refusal with which Norman Strange had instinctively prepared to reply into the words:

"It is very kind of you, Mrs. Custance It will give me great pleasure."

"Then would you mind coming soon—I mean in about half an hour?" she said. "I have to go down to the shop then, and, besides, it may be raining later on."

With a heavy sense that all times were alike to him, Norman Strange assured her that he was entirely at her service, and the slight, drab figure disappeared. Twenty minutes later he stood in the hall waiting for her as she came downstairs.

"You've been waiting," she said, lifting her eyes to him as she reached him, almost as if deprecating his annoyance.

"Why not?" he answered lightly. "May I not carry your basket?" he added, holding out his hand as he spoke for the little covered basket she held.

She let him take it without a word, nor did she speak as they crossed the garden and went out on to the road. The silence was broken at last by Norman Strange.

"Thornsdyke is an old village, is it not?" he said.

He had spoken solely from a sense that civility demanded conversation of some sort, but Mrs. Custance lifted her eyes and answered eagerly:

"Oh, yes," she said. "I believe it is quite old; at least, the houses are dreadfully miserable and tumbledown, some of them. But it's rather pretty in the summer, bits of it. The people think a great deal of

their gardens. I'm afraid it won't look very pretty this morning, though."

She was so obviously anxious that he should be pleased and interested, that his answer was given with more warmth of manner than he would have believed possible of himself where his new surroundings, with their terrible weight of significance, were concerned. And as they turned a corner of the muddy lane down which they were walking, he exclaimed:

"What a remarkably fine old church! What is the date, Mrs. Custance?"

"The date," she answered rather vaguely, "the date when it was built? I'm afraid I don't know. Do you think it's a pretty church? It's rather—rather dreary-looking, don't you think?"

Norman Strange had noticed the church more with a view to helping her than from

any other reason, but architecture had been a hobby of his at one time, and as they drew nearer he was roused to something very like enthusiasm.

"It's magnificent," he said. "Can we get in, Mrs. Custance? I should very much like to see the interior. I never saw anything more perfect than that Early English work."

That Mrs. Custance was ignorant of the very simplest architectural terms, that her knowledge, historical or artistic, was as slight as was her capacity—or indeed her desire — to conceal her ignorance, was very evident to Norman Strange before he had finished his exploration of the exterior of the church—the interior was inaccessible. And there was something in her wistful consciousness and deprecation of her own shortcomings, and in her uncon-

sciously betrayed admiration of his learning, that touched his youthful tendency to instruct.

"I could soon show you," he said at last, referring to the first principles of architecture, and speaking quite eagerly. "It is not a bit difficult, and you really ought to understand how fine this is."

He was still discoursing on the subject, when a few minutes later another turn in the lane brought them into the village street, and a woman passing wished the doctor's wife good morning, and favoured her companion with a prolonged stare. Instantly conscious of it as he was, the inspection seemed to recall him to his present self. He finished his sentence in a different tone, and his face hardened into the impassive whiteness which was the mask his sullen misery considered due to the companionship of a lady.

"I am afraid I must go in here," said Mrs. Custance as he finished speaking, stopping at the door of a little nondescript village shop. "I shan't be a minute. Will you—will you come in with me?"

Norman Strange glanced through the half-open door into the interior of the shop where two or three figures were to be seen.

"Thank you," he said, "I will wait here, I think." And he turned, as Mrs. Custance disappeared, and leant against a post, one of a series of five or six connected by an iron chain which faced the little shop on the opposite side of the pathway, and were, apparently, the remains of a continuous paling. He had waited about five minutes when a voice from the interior of the shop caught his ear, and he lifted his head mechanically as he won-

dered where he had heard it before. Nearly the whole of the little shop was visible to him as he stood, and by the counter, leaning back upon it on her elbow, stood the driver of the cart he had stopped the night before. Her wonderful red-gold hair was uncovered, and she was evidently at home. She was listening now to Mrs. Custance, who was holding a baby in her arms as she talked to the woman from whom she had apparently taken it. Norman saw her bend her own faded face over the child, kiss it gently, and then return it to its mother with a gesture that made him wonder vaguely that he had thought her ill-assured. Then she turned to the handsome girl.

"I will come up now, Alice," she said, "only——" She hesitated and glanced

out towards Norman Strange. He hardly caught her next words, but he saw the girl glance quickly in his direction, and he understood that she took in the position instantly. She followed Mrs. Custance as the latter walked to the shop door and said to Norman Strange—all the assurance with which she had touched the child gone from her manner—"Would you mind walking on a little way and coming back to me? There is a woman ill here, and I should like just to see her."

"Please don't think of me," returned Norman Strange quickly. He raised his hat slightly as he spoke in acknowledgment of the recognition in the flashing black eyes which were fixed on him from behind Mrs. Custance, who turned nervously.

"You found the house, then," said the

girl carelessly. She spoke with an ease of manner which contrasted as curiously with Mrs. Custance's diffidence as did their physical presences as they stood together in the doorway.

"Thanks to your direction," he replied. Then, as Mrs. Custance made a hesitating sound of enquiry, he waited while the girl explained, and after another word of thanks for her directions, he said simply to Mrs. Custance: "Please don't think of hurrying on my account. I will walk on and come back," and turned away.

He had walked nearly the length of the village street, his eyes bent on the ground, when he became aware that he was monopolising the narrow, cobblestone pavement, and that a man coming towards him was intimating his right to a share. Norman Strange lifted his head suddenly.

and was moving aside with a word of apology, when the other man said:

"Mr. Strange, I infer?"

Norman Strange stopped and looked at his questioner, who stood in the middle of the footpath with a large cigar in his mouth. He was a young man of about middle height, rather large in figure, with a face that was handsome enough but for a certain indescribable coarseness about it. He was dressed in an old tweed suit, and there was something slovenly about his whole appearance. His eyes, which were slightly bloodshot, were fixed on Norman with an inquisitive stare.

"Strange is my name," returned Norman distantly.

"Thought as much," continued the other. "Spotted you in a moment, and thought I'd introduce myself. My name is

Caton—Robert Caton. You've heard it, of course?"

There was an instant's dead silence as Norman Strange's haggard, dark eyes met the bloodshot ones before him. This was his fellow patient; his most suitable associate; the man with whom he must stand henceforth on an equality. Then he said in a voice that came from between set teeth:

"I have had that pleasure—yes!"

"That's all right, then; we know each other!" answered the other carelessly. "Taking a look at the place, eh? I was sorry not to meet you last night, but I was in need of a little repose."

He had turned as he began to speak and Norman Strange was retracing his steps, perforce beside him, but he made no reply either to the words or to the coarse laugh

with which his companion ended, and the latter continued :

" Feel a bit out of sorts this morning still, and thought I'd get a breath of air and look into the shop. Been into the shop ? Come in with me, and I'll show the finest woman you've ever seen. Don't frighten yourself, old man, that's not the lady ! "

The last sentence was uttered in a lower tone, half sneer, half " chaff," and he finished with another laugh. Mrs. Custance had come to the threshold of the shop alone. Seeing the two men she moved hurriedly and came towards them.

Without a glance at the man beside him, his face very white and set, Norman Strange went hastily forward to meet her.

" I hope you have not been waiting for me," he said. " Shall we go on ? "

He turned as he spoke and stood at her

side, waiting almost grimly as she said timidly:

"Good morning, Mr. Caton!"

And as he saw the small hand she held out touched carelessly by the shaking hand of the man they faced, his own hand thrust into his pocket was fiercely clenched.

"Shall we go on, Mrs. Custance?" he repeated.

CHAPTER V.

"A CAPITAL day's sport altogether!"

The speaker was Robert Caton, and the words concluded an account of a ratting expedition in which he had spent the afternoon. It was about eight o'clock in the evening. The drawing-room of the White House had long been lighted up, and the surface appearance of the room and its occupants—two men talking together while a woman sat by at work—was one of comfort and domesticity. Robert Caton was lounging in a large arm-chair with his feet on the fender as though he had recently come in, cold. His dress was negligent in the extreme, and smoking

jacket and slippers alike might have been said to have done their work. Opposite to him with his easy-chair pushed back, as though he had been comfortably established there for so long that a nearer neighbourhood to the fire was no longer desirable, sat Dr. Custance, with a newspaper across his knee. He, too, wore a smoking jacket, but his was in very much better condition than Robert Caton's, and in its first freshness had evidently been very handsome.

"You must have found it cold," he commented, as Robert Caton brought his speech to a close. "The east wind is abominable!"

He glanced over his shoulder as he spoke, shifting his attitude carelessly as he did so into another and easier variety of cross-legged negligence, and his wife rose silently, with a simple matter-of-course movement, rearranged the thick curtain over the

window behind him, and returned to her seat. It was a stiff little chair, placed nearly in the middle of the room, convenient doubtless for the light obtained from the hanging lamp, but rather cold and isolated in consequence of the two large chairs that shut in so much of the hearth. Mrs. Custance was rather pale; the recent ratting conversation had been slightly brutal in detail. Her face had not sufficient capacity of expression to show the anxiety with which she listened lest it should be resumed, or her relief at the short silence which ensued.

"Where's Strange?"

The question was asked by Robert Caton, and he struck his foot idly against the fender as he spoke, with a frown.

"Strange!" returned the doctor carelessly. "I haven't an idea. Leila, do you know where Strange is?"

He did not turn his head as he addressed his wife—repeating the whole question as though the previous words exchanged between himself and Caton had been inaudible to her; but Mrs. Custance turned towards him as she answered at once quickly and timidly.

"I don't know, I'm sure. Isn't he in his own room?"

"If I could say that, I should hardly ask where he was," returned her husband. His careless tone was hard with sarcasm; and Mrs. Custance took up her work again hurriedly and nervously, without speaking.

"What do you make of him, Custance, eh?"

The questioner was again Robert Caton, and the fender received another kick as the words were spoken. Dr. Custance glanced at him for a moment with eyes

which looked as though they would have been keen had their owner taken sufficient trouble.

"I don't know that I have made anything of him as yet," he answered placidly. "He has only been here three days."

"Three hours is enough for me to tell whether a fellow is my sort or not. Strange isn't, and that's the fact."

Neither of the men saw the face of the woman behind them, as she lifted it from her work for a moment. Nor would they have read much in it had they done so, for only in her eyes as she fixed them on Caton there struggled feebly an expression which strove to become disgust. Quite unconscious of the faded blue eyes, Robert Caton continued:

"He's such an unsociable brute! I've done the civil to him as hard as I can, and

he isn't up to anything. Asked him to come out ratting to-day, and he barely thanked me."

"Perhaps he's not much of a sportsman," suggested Dr. Custance absently.

"Confound it all, he must be something! I don't know whether he's opened out to you at all, but I've not seen him show a sign of interest in any blessed thing."

Robert Caton paused, but Dr. Custance's only reply was an inarticulate and indefinite sound, and he began again with a laugh:

"Perhaps we shall chum up by-and-by, eh, doctor? He's a better fellow drunk than sober, very likely, if he'd only give us the chance to see. It's time he did, in my opinion, instead of keeping so jolly dark."

Light as was the tone there was an undercurrent of brutal earnest in it, as though the confirmed and hopelessly de-

graded drunkard resented the three days' sobriety of the man in whom he expected to find a comrade. Robert Caton was nine-and-twenty, and his days of sobriety since he had been nineteen had been few. How far his vices were the result of heredity, how far of education, no one could have said. He had been a good-looking, self-indulgent boy, he had been a self-indulgent, vicious youth, and he was now well content to pay the fee required by Dr. Custance, that he might go his own way comparatively shielded from social consequences by that gentleman's protective and pity-compelling medical dictum —"incurable."

Dr. Custance smiled at him now, half indulgently, half reprovingly; but in the spare fingers of the little ungainly figure behind him the needle snapped suddenly. Mrs. Custance rose abruptly and as abruptly

sat down again. As though glad to effect a diversion, her husband glanced over his shoulder and said, in the tone of nonchalant sarcasm that he had used to her before:

"You don't find your chair comfortable, Leila, apparently. Suppose you take another and fidget less upon it."

He had turned his eyes away before she could lift hers, confused and bewildered, to his face, and his lips were parted to speak to Caton when the bell rang for supper. At the same moment the door opened, and Norman Strange came into the room.

The semblance of his old self, which had shown in him more or less distinctly during the day following his arrival at the White House, had disappeared almost completely, and the whole man seemed to be enveloped in some sort of heavy, intangible cloud. His eyes were hard and fierce, and his

mouth was set with a dogged expression at once of suffering and of indifference.

He did not look towards Mrs. Custance, and her eyes were fixed on him for an instant with a miserable, wistful questioning. Then she passed hurriedly out of the door as he held it open for her mechanically, listening at the same moment to Caton's self-assertive announcement of the capital sport he had had. His reply was civil in its interest and no more, and would have done nothing to uphold the conversation if Dr. Custance had not neatly grafted on to it a comment which led to an animated dissertation on sport generally from Caton. If it was aimed indirectly at Norman Strange, the latter was quite unconscious of the fact. He made no attempt to join in the conversation, but sat with his eyes fixed moodily on the tablecloth, eating nothing.

"Don't you care about killing things, Mr. Strange?"

The voice was very low, frightened at its own sound apparently, and Caton's loud tones drowned it before it reached either himself or Dr. Custance; but Norman Strange started violently as he heard it. He did not turn to her, and he poured some water into the glass beside him as he said briefly:

"Not much, Mrs. Custance."

The words did not invite further conversation, and Mrs. Custance's supper lay untouched upon her plate as her hands stole nervously into her lap and there clasped and twisted one another painfully. Her eyes were almost bright with the effort she was making, as she continued:

"Gentlemen always — it seems to me there is always something to be said between

them about things like that. I have always wondered why it is so interesting."

The interesting topic in question had reached a point between Robert Caton and Dr. Custance at which the details were not pleasant hearing; and glancing towards her, Norman Strange thought that her heightened colour and the nervous twitch about her mouth were due to physical repulsion. He could not tell that not one word that Robert Caton was saying was heard by her, and he took up her words quickly, though with an obvious effort, anxious to distract her attention.

"Half the world is always wondering at the amusements of the other half," he said. "That is a truism, I'm afraid, Mrs. Custance, but really I think there is no subject on which we are so intolerant of tastes that differ from our own individual

taste. It isn't only that we can't get on with a man whose amusements are different to our own—that's not so unnatural perhaps —but we do look down upon him so!"

He finished with the smile that his words demanded. She smiled vaguely in return, evidently hardly understanding him. But she answered, with a brave effort to keep his attention, if somewhat irrelevantly:

"Are you fond of boating? We used to boat on the Dart a great deal before—when I was at home."

The boating anecdotes into which he plunged lasted until supper was nearly over, and were interrupted by a domestic enquiry addressed by Dr. Custance to his wife. The sporting discussion being by that time disposed of and the necessity for a second conversation removed, Norman Strange relapsed once more into silence, and Mrs.

Custance, though her eyes had wandered wistfully towards him more than once, had made no further attempt to make him break that silence when her husband rose from the table.

"Will you smoke, Strange?" he said.

"Thanks!" was the brief answer. "No!"

"Then you would rather go back to the drawing-room than come to the smoking-room, no doubt?"

There was a moment's pause, and then Norman Strange answered, in a tone and manner full of heavy constraint:

"I have some letters to write, and I will go upstairs at once, I think. Good night."

He was turning away with a slight bow to her, when Mrs. Custance held out her hand, timidly and awkwardly enough.

"Good night, Mr. Strange," she said.

He barely touched her fingers with his own, and went slowly and heavily out of the room.

A few minutes later Mrs. Custance returned to her needlework in the empty drawing-room, going back to the little uncomfortable seat in the middle of the room as if from force of habit. But there was something about her face to-night that was not habitual. It was not definitely unhappy; it was one of those faces in which an expression of great distress or of great joy is alike inconceivable—a face in which every emotion is reflected subdued and faint in tone. But to-night the faint, wistful distress which had struggled to life in her eyes on Norman Strange's entrance before supper did not die out. She lifted her head now and again as though to listen

for a sound in the room above—Norman Strange's room—and though she went on with her work mechanically after each pause, the stitches she set were far less even than usual.

There was the same look in her eyes the next morning, and they were rather heavy, too, when she lifted them to Norman Strange's face when he came down to breakfast. This time he did not seem to see the hand she offered him — perhaps because the little gesture was made so timidly. At any rate he did not take it, nor did he meet her eyes. The dark shadow that had hung about him on the evening before brooded about him now more heavily than ever. His replies to Dr. Custance's suave words as to his disposal of the day before him were as curt as was consistent with courtesy. He was

going to take a long walk, he said, and he might not be back until the evening. There was a certain covert defiance in his tone as though he thought it possible that the man under whose charge he was—nominally at least—might offer some objection. But Dr. Custance never objected unless to something that interfered with his own comfort, and as he uttered his easy assent his "patient" left the room.

It was a bright morning—the first of March—and spring seemed to be asserting itself with exuberant freshness and gaiety. But Mrs. Custance coming towards the White House at about four o'clock in the afternoon after her solitary country walk, seemed to be in no wise touched by the bright influences about her. On the contrary, it was not only her little lonely, sombrely-dressed figure that seemed out of harmony

with the surrounding light and life. Her step was dull and tired, and there was a faintly oppressed look on her face as though the brightness was almost painful to her in its contrast with a care that would not be forgotten.

She opened the door of the White House, and stood a moment in the hall, hesitating. Then, awkwardly and hurriedly, almost furtively, she opened the door first of the drawing-room, then of the dining-room, and looked in. Each room was empty. She stood for a moment on the threshold of the dining-room and then went suddenly along the passage to the smoking-room. The door was shut and she paused a moment, her faded face quite white with the rapid beating of her heart. Then she opened it as she had opened the other two.

"Mrs. Custance! I hope I may flatter

myself you were looking for me? Is there anything I can do for you? Won't you come and sit down in this delightful chair and have a chat?"

Norman Strange was alone in the room and he had apparently sprung out of the long chair on her appearance. He stood before her now catching unsteadily at its tall back, his breath coming irregularly, his face flushed, his eyes bright and watery. His words had come thickly and indistinctly in that far-away, unreal voice which is characteristic of these strange absences of the mind —drunkenness or delirium—with an expansive exuberant flow as unlike the natural man as could be.

Without a word, but with a little catch in her quick breath, Mrs. Custance had stopped short in the doorway; she stood there looking full at him, with a terrible suggestion

in her direct gaze and absolute absence of self-consciousness that the soul of the man before her was not there, that she was, and felt herself to be, alone with its empty shell. Perhaps it was its whiteness, perhaps it was because she was indeed drawn completely out of herself, but her face for the moment was absolutely expressive; expressive of that pitiful misery which women can feel for a fallen and degraded man. She did not speak, and her silence seemed to affect him somehow, for he laughed foolishly.

"I'm afraid I've offended you, Mrs. Custance," he began, in the same exaggeratedly open and ingenuous manner. "Perhaps you think it's not the thing to have brandy bottles behind that sofa? Well, you're right, no doubt—no doubt; but it was just a joke, and you can make allowances for a joke, I know?"

He paused as if for her answer, and repeated more urgently :

" You'll make allowance for a joke, won't you ? "

He fixed his eyes on hers as he spoke, and with the necessity for speech an agony of confusion seemed to fall on her. She stammered something incoherent, and he interrupted her with another laugh ; a noisy one this time.

" It's my belief you think I've been drinking that brandy—think I'm drunk—drunk ! I don't want to be rude to a lady, but really, you know ! Why, just look here ! "

He took his hand from the chair to which he had been clinging as if to demonstrate to her the fact that he could stand alone, and attempting to make a step towards her, reeled heavily back and fell helplessly upon the cushions behind him.

With an inarticulate sound of inexpressible pity and pain, Mrs. Custance shut the door suddenly, and clasping her hands for a moment over her face, she hurried away down the passage. As she passed the hall door it opened; her husband came in and she stopped suddenly.

"Arnold," she said, "Mr. Strange is in the smoking-room."

She was trembling from head to foot, and her hands were tightly squeezed together, but her voice was its low, subdued self.

"Well," answered her husband. "Is that all?"

"He—he——"

"He's drunk, I suppose?"

"Yes!"

The word was hardly audible, and as she uttered it Mrs. Custance turned away and went upstairs.

CHAPTER VI.

ANOTHER bright March morning had come and gone; this one, in spite of its brightness, piercingly cold. Into the dining-room of the White House no sunshine came, and the small face and figure of Mrs. Custance as she sat sewing by the table looked grey and pinched. The fire had sunk low in the grate with those depressing sounds a dying fire makes, but she had not noticed it. All the morning she had hardly moved, except when a need for something from the work-basket at her hand caused her to lift for an instant a wan, dull face.

One o'clock struck from the little clock

on the mantelpiece unheeded by her, and then the door was opened and she started violently. It was the youth from the village who did duty in the doctor's house as page, and he had come to lay the table for lunch. Mrs. Custance rose hurriedly and glanced from his tray to the clock as she hastily collected her work materials.

"I — I didn't know it was so late, William!" she said nervously; and then she shivered a little, and going to the fireplace she knelt down on the rug and began to put the embers together, warming her small blue hands. She turned her head as she did so to watch the boy as he laid the table, and there was something in her attitude which was strangely girlish, and at variance with the worn, subdued face, and the sombre matronliness of her dress. The boy was setting places for two only, and

with another little shiver she turned once more to the fire. The boy finished his work, left the room, and returned with the lunch itself, and still she did not move. Then he withdrew and rang the dinner-bell, and she started to her feet and stood with her eyes on the floor, her fingers working nervously at a fold of her dress. Quite five minutes passed, and then a man's step came slowly along the hall, and Norman Strange came into the room.

White as his face had been when he opened the door, his very lips lost their colour as his eyes fell upon the solitary occupant of the room. He stopped short and his eyes dropped. He did not speak or move, nor did the little, trembling woman at the other end of the room so much as raise her eyes, and there was a moment's dead silence. Then Mrs. Custance said in a low voice,

which all her efforts could not render steady :

"My husband told me to say that he was very sorry to be obliged to go and see about a horse to-day. Mr. Caton has gone with him."

Having made the necessary statement she stopped, as though not trusting herself to do more than control her nervousness. She had moved to her place at the head of the table as she spoke, and without a word Norman Strange took the other place. Such words as are almost indispensable to the commencement of a meal passed between them—low murmurs on her part, monosyllabic responses on his part—and then silence fell between them again ; silence in which the whole meal passed. Mrs. Custance sat with her eyes fixed upon the knife and fork with which she merely played, afraid ap-

parently to look up. Norman Strange sat intrenched, as far as his shaken nerves and miserable physical condition would allow, in dogged endurance; hardly even pretending to eat. No sooner did Mrs. Custance, having folded her table napkin with fingers that would hardly be controlled, rise nervously and mechanically from her chair than he rose too, and left the room, as he had entered it, in silence.

Almost for the first time since the bell for luncheon had sounded, Mrs. Custance raised her eyes as he turned away and followed him with them to the door. He shut it behind him, and she walked vaguely to the window and stood there for a minute or two with her forehead leaning against the pane. Then she moved with a little breath, which would have been a long sigh had she been a woman given to expression, and

prepared to resume the monotonous needle-work in which her solitary afternoon as well as her long morning was generally spent.

It was not until nearly an hour later that she remembered suddenly some wishes of her husband with regard to the alteration of some pictures in the drawing-room. He had wished it made that day, and she rose from her seat with nervous haste as she realised how nearly she had forgotten it. It signified an anxious sense of her own negligence that there was apparently no room in her mind for the thought of summoning help, or for the thought of a possible caller. She fetched the steps herself and took down the two smaller pictures that were to be moved. Then she moved the steps—dragging them with some difficulty this time, as though her stock of strength had been small enough to be considerably affected by her previous

demands on it—and mounted them again. The picture now to be moved was a very large engraving in a heavy frame; the nail was high above her head, and some minutes of painful effort were necessary before she succeeded in jerking the wire from it, to be herself nearly overbalanced by the weight thus suddenly thrown upon her arms. She did not fall, but her nerves were shaken by the shock; and she was standing clutching the picture, unable to descend the steps with her burden, and unable to get rid of it by any other means, when a low voice from the doorway said suddenly:

"Let me take it from you, Mrs. Custance," and Norman Strange crossed the room quickly, and reaching up, took the picture from her, even then not lifting his eyes to her face. Then, seeing that she was clinging tremulously to the steps,

he gave her his hand and helped her carefully down.

"Where is it to go?" he said. "It is too heavy for you!"

She explained to him in a few confused words, and gravely bowing his head in acquiescence, he fetched the smaller pictures, put them up, and then moved the steps and hung the larger one, all with the same ready helpfulness and in the same silence. Having finished, he was leaving the room again when Mrs. Custance, who had watched him in a silence like his own, made an agitated, uncertain step towards him.

"Mr. Strange," she faltered, "won't you—won't you—if you would help me—there is the book-case!"

He stopped, his hand on the door, not turning towards her and speaking apparently through clenched teeth.

"Get one of the servants to help you, Mrs. Custance," he said. "They are fitter company for you than I."

"If you would help me!" She stopped, clasping her hands tightly as though her inability to express herself, to do more than reiterate words already used, was absolute distress to her. Something in her low, stifled voice seemed to touch him. He turned abruptly.

"Mrs. Custance," he said, "there is one thing I should like to say. I beg you earnestly to believe that if I had had any idea that there was a lady here I should never have come. For yesterday —if words of apology from such a brute as I am were of any worth at all——" His voice had sunk to a hoarse murmur and he turned away with a gesture of humiliation and despair terrible to see. "It can't

last long!" he muttered brokenly, "it can't last long!"

Whether she heard the last words or no she made no answer to them, only her eyes dilated, and she pressed her hands together until the pressure must have been absolute pain.

"It isn't that you need say anything to me," she began in a voice so low that he could hardly catch the words. "It isn't for me it matters! But — but — oh, why?"

The last word came from her the merest frightened whisper, but in its pitiful, forlorn enquiry, its speechless appeal for allowance for her own audacity in making that enquiry, it was indescribably eloquent. Her eyes, full of a dumb struggle, were fixed full upon him; her face was all quivering with nervousness and distress.

No eloquent harangue, no adjuration, could have appealed to Norman Strange as did that mute beseeching for an answer. He paused a moment looking at her, and a sharp spasm passed across his face. Then he said, with a self-restrained gentleness about which there was a reassurance and protection for her which made the situation inexpressibly curious, his words themselves inexpressibly terrible:

"It's done, Mrs. Custance. Nothing can alter it or help me now. I have degraded myself. I'm not fit to speak to a lady, I am not fit to work, I am not fit to live. There is no hope and no future for such a brute as I am. Do you think it possible to get over such shame as I have brought upon myself?"

In his morbid despair he had asked the question with a half-smile, as though the

answer were only too self-evident. But Mrs. Custance, to whom his previous words in their contrast with the manner in which they were uttered, had conveyed little but confusion, seized upon the straightforward question and answered it in all simplicity.

"Yes," she said.

It was the first syllable of hope that had come to him, and he staggered under it for an instant as though it had been a blow. Then he recovered himself and smiled again.

"I am afraid you don't quite understand," he said. "Every one who knows me knows me now as—a drunkard! I know myself as—that. You are pitiful, Mrs. Custance! Except out of pity you could not speak to me at all. You don't respect me. I don't respect myself. It's all over with me!"

As he reiterated the words their full

significance seemed to rise up within him and he turned away abruptly. He walked to the window and stood with his back to her. But it was only for a moment, and then he dropped into a chair and his head fell forward upon his hands with a groan.

There was an interval of perfect stillness —an interval in which the only movement in the room was the movement of her nervous hands—and then Mrs. Custance, with a faint, pink flush of intense effort in her sallow face, crossed the room and stood beside him.

"Don't be angry with me for speaking of what I dare say I don't understand!" she began in a low, hurried, and uneven voice. "Perhaps I've made a mistake, but it seems to me as if you were going on because you think you can never get back. Oh," her voice rose to a little stifled cry, "oh! what

can I say to make you see how dreadfully mistaken that is? I'm so stupid and I say things so badly, but I know—I know that it is never too late to get back if one really wants to. If one repents one can always be forgiven."

She paused, stopped apparently by a sense of the utter inadequacy of the conventional phrase to which she had been driven by the narrow limitation of her power of expression, and Norman Strange moved wearily and lifted his head.

"That is a good woman's argument," he said, gently. "But the world is not like that, Mrs. Custance."

"But what do people think of but the present?" she answered rapidly and incoherently. "Who thinks of anything in anybody's life beyond what they can see? Get better and go back to your life, and who will

remember anything that is past? Who will remember enough even to know what you have done in getting back? Ah! how badly, how badly I say it!"

She stopped abruptly, looking into his face with an unconscious reliance on his power to understand her, an unconscious appeal to him to do so; and he waited a moment looking at her with strange eyes which he had lifted to her as she spoke, and which had grown stranger as he listened.

"You said I didn't respect you, Mr. Strange," she went on, and though her tone grew only more stifled and suppressed as her earnestness increased, the faint flush was a burning spot of colour now, on either cheek. "Oh, won't you try and think that all the things you've said to me are as much mistakes as that? I feel so sure that you are too—too clever and—and everything, not

to be able to save yourself if you will only try! Oh, don't you see that you are only making bad worse? Don't you see that it is throwing your life away of your own accord to say it's hopeless? It's wicked——" she stopped herself suddenly, as though realising what she was saying. "I beg your pardon," she faltered. "I beg your pardon!"

"My own accord!" he repeated slowly, not noticing her last words. He was still sitting, as though his mind was too fully occupied for physical consciousness, and as she stood looking down at him he looked away from her into space as he repeated the words: "My own accord. And what do you think I ought to do, Mrs. Custance?"

But the unusual excitement that had carried her so far had died out in that moment of realisation, and Mrs. Custance turned away to the window behind them, her

hand working at the window curtain, her eyes full of tears.

"I don't—I didn't mean that I could—that I had any right to speak to you," she murmured. "It is only that—if you would only try!"

The tears were running fast down the face she kept turned to the window, and the last word came with a hard little sob.

Norman Strange rose and turned sharply towards her.

"It is too late," he cried, the pain in his voice making it harsh and intense as he seemed to thrust from him the hope her words presented. "It is too late! If it were not—perhaps—perhaps I might!"

CHAPTER VII.

A QUIET girlhood passed in a country village; an early marriage followed by eight years of married life, unmarked by any more striking incident than two changes of residence, from London to a north country town, and from thence to the village of Thornsdyke; cannot be said to constitute an eventful life. Mental experiences, passionate mental life, are of course compatible with the most peaceful outward circumstances. But though the former is indeed an inseparable adjunct of all human life, the share of it that had fallen to Mrs. Custance had been transmuted, by the temperament on which it acted, into something so

matter-of-fact in its dreariness that only a very sympathetic onlooker, and one who should have known her infinitely better than she knew herself, could have understood that anything so spiritual in its associations had indeed formed a feature in her colourless life.

Having neither home nor parents of her own, she had grown up with her only sister in the house of an uncle in Devonshire. The uncle was rich; the atmosphere of the house was practical and matter-of-fact. The dependence of the two sisters was cheerily accepted and ignored, but there was an unexpressed understanding that the present state of things would only last until they were of marriageable age, and that they would then provide for themselves. The elder sister was a very pretty, bright girl, and the younger one, Leila, was a faint copy of her; pretty but not very pretty, a little

stupid and weak in character, but sweeter-natured than her sister, behind whom she sheltered.

At nineteen the elder girl did what was expected of her in the most satisfactory way ; she became engaged to a rich man in the Indian Civil Service. The pleased excitement of the household took the form of constant hopeful auguries for the younger sister; and it seemed a dispensation of Providence into which it would have been impertinent to enquire too closely when a doctor from one of the neighbouring villages, who was vaguely understood to have recently come into some money, and to have bought a practice in London, proposed to Leila. She accepted him, as a matter of course. He was fifteen years her senior, but he was very handsome and very pleasant ; she liked him very much, and if anything more was

necessary she did not know it. Her girlhood had been quite happy in its colourless contentment, and in the same colourless contentment she went away with her husband into her new life, a girl of eighteen, with all her character and her future to be moulded by his hands.

If the Mrs. Custance who was accepted by Norman Strange as the middle-aged wife of a middle-aged man, had had imagination enough to conjure up before her present self a picture of the eighteen-year-old girl who had left her uncle's house only eight years before, she would not have recognised the picture; she would have been unable to realise that she had ever been other than she now was. There had been no shock of disappointment, for she had expected nothing; no sharp suffering, for it had all come about so naturally, and keen pain was as

foreign to her nature as keen pleasure. Her husband had grown tired of her; she had subsided from bride to wife—as such a man as she had married understands the word. The faint liking she had had for him died gradually away, and as gradually a faint fear of him rose in her and became the only sentiment with which he inspired her. They had been very poor, and life had been dull and grey and very lonely, though she hardly realised it. Her sister had gone to India, and after her marriage she had never revisited her Devonshire home. The friends of her girlhood had passed out of her life with girlhood itself; she had indeed no friends, properly so called. Such slight acquaintances as she made found her dull and uninteresting; and she, shy and ill-assured, had been unable to pass beyond the stiffest stage of conventionality. There

had only once been a time when she had been conscious of unhappiness, when her desire for the touch of baby hands—a desire never to be satisfied—had been a dull incessant ache. But that was long ago now, and it had died away, numbed by the passing of monotonous years. When she had come to Thornsdyke with her husband, a year before the coming of Norman Strange, her youth was past at twenty-six, as though it had never been, and she had been unhesitatingly accepted by the neighbourhood as a rather stupid and shy little middle-aged woman.

Nervous and uncertain as her manner always was, there was something about her subdued and absolutely crushed throughout the evening that followed upon her frightened and apparently fruitless appeal to Norman Strange. Dr. Custance returned

from his horse-dealing expedition in a decidedly unpleasant frame of mind, but even his sarcasm could add little to her shrinking, unobtrusive, evidently entirely unconscious depression. Her face was very small and white, and there were red rims round her eyes.

There was a dumb misery in those blue eyes, and with it a forlorn, inarticulate appeal, as she lifted them momentarily to his face as she and Norman Strange met at supper. They rested on a white, set face with haggard eyes, which looked to them, if possible, more desperate than before, and then they fell, the misery in them stronger than ever. She did not look at him again, even when she wished him an inaudible good night, and she did not offer him her hand. Something in her tone and manner suggested that she dared not.

Throughout the next day she saw him only at supper, when he came into the room looking very tired. He had been walking all day, he explained briefly, in answer to Robert Caton's comments. The explanation was apparently by no means satisfactory to Caton, and with a covert sneer he plunged into an ostentatiously intimate discussion with Dr. Custance, to the complete exclusion of any third person.

No sooner had Norman disappeared, however—and he did so directly supper was over—than Caton, who was accustomed to ignore Mrs. Custance's presence with as little ceremony as did her husband, broke into a coarse tirade against him. To his fellow "patient" Norman's reserve and the heavy shadow of despair that hung about him was neither more nor less than "confounded humbug and unsociableness"; and

he proceeded to dilate upon the subject with great energy and force of language, while Dr. Custance threw in here and there a remark of as soothing a nature as possible. Neither of them noticed that when the torrent of abuse was at its highest, Mrs. Custance rose, shaking from head to foot, and left the room with her blue eyes quite bright.

She was in the dining-room on the morning following, spending the hours between breakfast and lunch, as she generally did spend them, in dreary solitude, her fingers occupied with the monotonous needlework which was her only occupation; her little figure in the dull, silent room, looking dreary enough against its background of rain-blurred window-panes. It was a wet morning, wet enough, at present, to keep indoors any one whose duty did not call

him out, and she had heard, as she moved about the house on her household duties, the voices of Robert Caton and her husband as they established themselves in the smoking-room to spend an idle morning. She had been sitting alone for nearly an hour, when the door opened, and lifting her eyes with a start, she met those of Norman Strange, who was standing in the doorway.

"Mrs. Custance," he said, "may I come and sit in here? Shall I be in your way? I am rather tired of smoke."

There was an instant's pause, and Mrs. Custance sat, her needle resting in her hand, her face lifted to him, with the lips a little parted, as though in some sudden shock of surprise. Then she answered quickly, and rather incoherently:

"Not at all! Oh, no! I mean I shall be very glad if you will come."

He had brought with him no book—no occupation of any kind, and for some minutes he sat motionless, with his arms folded on the table, and his eyes fixed on the thin hands of his hostess, moving again now, but moving rapidly and awkwardly under his unseeing gaze. Then he said absently:

"It is very good of you to have me here."

The quiet of the room and the gentle womanly presence were very pleasant to him, though he did not trace his sense of rest to that, or, indeed, to any definite source.

She did not answer, except in a faint, hardly articulate murmur of deprecation; but she lifted her eyes hurriedly to his face and dropped them instantly again. There was another pause, and then he said slowly and ponderingly:

"Mrs. Custance, do you really think there would be any chance for me?"

Her fingers tightened suddenly on the piece of work she held, and she turned her face to him mutely as though quite unable to find any words in the sudden surprise and hope which quivered for an instant in her face. But he had apparently asked the question more for the sake of giving it words than with any wish for her opinion, and he went on unanswered:

"I wonder whether you know how it's been with me?" and hardly waiting for her sympathetic murmur, he told her all the story. He was evidently telling it more to himself than to her, and he made it as black as the plain facts could be made. But there were the plain facts only, with none of the morbidness which had given them their hopelessness, and as he finished,

terrible as it was, the end was not final. It was obviously not a story of irretrievable disgrace.

And not even the wholly new significance about the end of the story stood out in stronger contrast to the tone of the man of thirty-six hours before than did the manner of the telling—grave and stern, but desperate and reckless no longer, The whole personality of the man was altered. His face was haggard still, but it was haggard with long strain of thought, and not with hopeless misery. The hard constraint was gone from his voice.

Over the dull despair of Norman Strange's life a change had come indeed, and it had not come lightly. As there are physical diseases for which the cure must be sought in pain, so the first stirring in him of desire and hope of redemption had tortured

him as his hopelessness itself had never done. When and how the thought of possible salvation had dawned in him he never knew. The stress of the struggle with himself and with his morbid despair into which it slowly ripened obscured altogether its dim beginnings, and the words in which it had in truth originated—words uttered by the little woman to whom he hardly gave a thought—were almost forgotten by him. He had come to Mrs. Custance this morning with a hazy remembrance only of their interview of two days before; come to her, indeed, with a vague sense that between them the ice was already broken; but mainly because she was a woman, and his nature was one craving that expression that only a woman would allow him.

Having spoken he paused—paused so long that the quivering lips of the woman

who had listened to him were parted, as though with a tremendous effort, to falter out words which would have been a poor reflection of her confused feelings, when he said slowly—and in the words the change in him seemed to touch its consummation:

"Perhaps, after all, I'm nothing but a coward! Perhaps I might do something with my life, even now! The man who hasn't courage to show fight——" The last word came from him with an unmistakable ring and he broke off, rose suddenly, and turned to the window.

"You will! Oh, you will!"

Vaguely as she had understood him, far above the level of her stunted spiritual understanding as was the long-dormant impulse which was stirring in him once again, the main fact at its simplest was clear to her. The words she spoke were stifled, suppressed,

hopelessly inadequate, but she was shaking from head to foot, her eyes were full of tears, and her lips trembled. He turned his head as she spoke and as his eyes fell on her face, and on the hands clasped tightly together as though in self-repression, something in them touched him.

"Poor little woman!" he said to himself vaguely. "Poor little woman!"

She was not pretty; there was no youth about her to affect him; she had none of that confidence in the power of her sex which is a woman's weapon. She had no confidence at all. He was not conscious of her influence as he must have been had it been exercised in any of the ordinary womanly ways; but about her very weakness, her ungainly fadedness, in the deprecating appeal which strove to declare itself on her dull face, there was a power which swayed

him, unrecognised as it was, and swayed him for his good. He looked at her for a moment and then answered her gently and quickly, speaking even protectingly and reassuringly.

"I will, Mrs. Custance," he said. "Yes, indeed I will!"

And in those words, almost without consciousness of what he was doing, he took his first definite step back to his lost self-respect; for as he uttered them they became a pledge with himself.

"I am so glad!"

She spoke the words in a low, jerky tone, which did not serve to lessen their futility, but by this time it had become natural to Norman Strange to make allowances for her. The painful tension that must, under any other circumstances, have attended the resolution at which he had just

arrived was hardly felt by him in the instinct to put her at her ease ; the deeper issues of the moment seemed to stand aside, and he smiled as he said :

"And I may think of you as my friend ?"

"If—if you care to," she faltered. "I'm afraid——"

She did not finish her sentence. It was a habit of hers to leave sentences unfinished as though she had realised half-way through that they could be of no interest to any one. But the self-depreciation of her tone was not unpleasant to him ; on the contrary, it fell gratefully on his broken self-esteem, and seemed to throw his humiliation further into the background. With the stirring of his self-respect something of the superiority of clever young manhood touched him again, and it made his tone very pleasant as he said :

"You are only too good to me!"

The words seemed to recall him to the present, and he turned to the window again with a sudden shadow on his face, and a short, sharp sigh.

The rain, which earlier in the morning had threatened to last all day, had ceased, and a watery gleam of sunshine was struggling for existence with the clouds. The garden over which the window looked was separated by a hedge from the road to the village, and at the bottom of the garden Norman Strange's eyes fell upon a figure, the sight of which deepened the shadow in them—the figure of Robert Caton. He was leaning over the hedge, evidently talking to some one in the road, and the next instant Norman Strange saw that that some one was the handsome girl at the village post office.

Two days before, Norman Strange, in

his heavy disregard of everything about him, would have noticed nothing; would have looked at Robert Caton with only a shuddering sense of their fellowship. But to-day in his newly-roused condition he was struck by something significant about the picture made by the man and the girl as she lingered in the road with her handsome face turned towards him as he leant over the hedge.

There was something in the outline of Caton's pose, something coarse and familiar in his gesture as he talked to her, which made the man who watched glance with a sudden youthful indignation at the face of the listening girl. He was wishing vaguely that he could see its expression, when he heard Mrs. Custance say:

"Ah, there is Alice! Is she coming for a lesson, I wonder?" She paused a moment

she had come up to him, and was looking past him out of the window. "I wish she would not talk so much to Mr. Caton!" she murmured uneasily.

With a chivalrous instinct against watching the girl, Norman Strange turned from the window, speaking lightly and easily as though he had seen nothing.

"Miss Alice, whoever she may be, doesn't look as though she were likely to be a very docile pupil. What do you teach her, may I ask, Mrs. Custance?"

"Oh, I teach her—it's nothing. Alice is much cleverer than I am. I only show her about needlework. She is such a good girl at the bottom, only she is not like other girls."

"She isn't like most other girls to look at, certainly. Who is she, Mrs. Custance?"

"She's — oh, she's one of the village girls; her grandmother, who brought her up, is the post-mistress. She brought her up very badly, I'm afraid, for she's dreadfully—dreadfully headstrong. I'm teaching her needlework, because when her grandmother dies she must keep herself somehow —I don't believe she'll ever marry; she's dreadful to all the young men about—and she says she won't ever be a servant. And, indeed, I don't think she would ever get a place."

Mrs. Custance stopped abruptly as though self-convicted of having made a very long speech; her subject had evidently been very near her heart, and Norman Strange said interestedly:

"And so you teach her needlework? That is very good of you, isn't it?"

"Oh, no," she answered with some

surprise in her tone. "It is good of her to let me try and help her."

She was looking uneasily out of the window as she spoke, and Norman Strange knew that the pair on either side of the hedge were still there, even before she interrupted herself suddenly, and said in an undertone with a slight sigh of relief:

"Ah, here she comes!" The words had been merely a parenthesis, and Mrs. Custance turned away from the window as she went on: "I am very fond of her, and I know — there was a little baby in the village, the child of the woman in the next cottage to the Eades, and its mother died." She stopped as if too little used to being listened to to tell the story she had evidently begun upon. "The baby died," she said, "and I've known Alice ever since."

"And she knows you?" he suggested lightly and courteously.

"She is fond of me," she answered simply. "They say—she says—" she paused and finished—"I am very fond of her."

Mrs. Custance turned to the table and took up her work again, and Norman Strange said:

"The lesson comes off here, no doubt, Mrs. Custance, and I should be in the way, I'm afraid. It is fairly fine now, you see, and I will go for a walk."

She murmured something hesitating and inaudible, and taking the murmur to signify assent he responded pleasantly and moved down the room with a smile of farewell. He did not see her eyes, as they followed him with mute distress and uncertainty in their glance; but turning, with his hand on the door, the solitariness of the figure

he was leaving struck him forcibly. He paused.

"Are you generally at work in here in the morning, Mrs. Custance?" he said. "May I come and read to you sometimes, or would it bore you?"

"Oh, no! I should—it would be so nice—only—it's very kind. Wouldn't it be a trouble to you?"

There was such genuine eagerness, astonishment, and self-depreciation in her tone, it put him into the position of conferring so great a favour, that no good-natured young man who had once had his fair share of pleasure in that position, and a fair sense of his own value, could fail to be touched by it. Norman Strange had never thought to find himself looked up to, to find himself an object for gratitude again; his self-respect revived still further, and something of his

old enthusiasm stirred in him again as he responded eagerly, unconsciously accepting, in the very graciousness of his tone and manner, the position she allotted to him.

"It would be a pleasure, on the contrary." He paused, and then remembering their first walk together and her ignorance on the subject of Thornsdyke church, he added, in the same tone: "Perhaps you might like to get up some architecture, Mrs. Custance? It would be the greatest pleasure to me to help you, if you would care about it. I'll see about some books."

His hand was still upon the door-handle, but as he spoke the last words he drew back as a sharp tap fell upon the other side of the door.

"Thank you! Oh, come in! It's very kind!" said Mrs. Custance confusedly, and then the door opened and Alice Eade came in.

"Did you expect me, Mrs. Custance?" she said. "I couldn't remember what we arranged."

Her face was flushed, and she spoke rather hurriedly, taking no notice of Norman.

"I think we arranged for this afternoon, Alice," returned Mrs. Custance; "but it doesn't matter in the least—not in the least," she repeated, as the girl uttered a quick exclamation of regret. "This will suit me quite as well; I've—I've nothing to do."

She glanced at Norman as she spoke, and Alice Eade turned to him.

"Good morning," she said.

"Good morning," he returned pleasantly, looking at her with eyes quite other than the haggard, uninterested ones with which he had seen her on the occasion of their two previous meetings. "Well, Mrs. Custance, I won't interrupt," and with another

"Good morning" to the girl, he left the room.

"Why does she let that fellow speak to her?" he said to himself. He did not know how strong a token of returning mental health lay in the fact that his thoughts as he went towards the front door did not revert immediately to himself. And the youthful chivalrous indignation for the girl was not a more significant sign of his reversion to his old self than was the fact that Caton figured in his thoughts as "that fellow," with none of that bitter sense of his own equality with his fellow-patient which had made every thought of the latter a hideous humiliation to him. "Why does she let him speak to her? They looked from that window—— What's he doing?"

More than once — with increasing frequency, indeed — during the days that

followed, Norman Strange asked himself the same uneasy question. It seemed to him that he never met or heard of Alice Eade without a suggestion of Caton in the background. And it so happened that he saw a good deal of her. She was often at the White House, and he chanced to meet her frequently about the village and in his country walks.

The interest in her, which had been stirred by the merest accident, almost simultaneously with the renewal of his old force; an interest quickened by the vague uneasiness for her created in his mind by the picture she had made with Caton as he looked at them from the window; seemed to develope as that force developed, and to belong naturally and as a matter of course to his new life.

CHAPTER VIII.

For to all intents and purposes it was a new life that Norman Strange led as the windy March days followed one upon another; or rather, it was a renewal of the life that had seemed to have completely passed away. The struggle involved was fierce, at times agonising. Half-hearted action, gradual or tentative measures were impossible to him; what he did he must needs do hotly. Having decided with himself that his position might indeed yet be retrieved he threw himself into the contest with a certain ardour of self-conquest, a certain fierce exultation in the thought of riding rough-shod over weakness

and faint-heartedness. He anticipated only the mental difficulty of sustaining his new faith in the possibility of such retrieval. He fortified himself mainly to do battle with his own despair, and he overlooked altogether the awful power of the master whose slave he had become. The shock of finding that despair and faint-heartedness were not the only forces arrayed against him; the self-loathing and contempt induced in him by the physical suffering which he could only endure and by no means prevent; almost threw him once more off his balance when he first realised the truth. The check had come only just in time. A little later and the physical difficulties might have been insuperable, except with years of treatment, and even as it was he suffered terribly. There came hours when the horrible craving—by which at the same time he felt himself unspeakably

degraded—was almost more than he could bear, when he could hardly force himself to speak or move without some hideous outbreak, when to meet his own eyes in the looking-glass was to meet incarnate temptation.

He never thought of reading the frightened blue eyes that watched him at such times with such a misery of impotent sorrow and longing. But often and often—and even in his worst moments this would happen—he was faintly conscious of an appeal in them; an appeal which stirred his gentleness and his consideration; an appeal which—though he only thought vaguely of not distressing Mrs. Custance, as he would have thought it brutal to frighten a child—stood between him and the demon he had fostered

Everything that external temptation could add to internal craving was supplied to the situation by Robert Caton, by whom the

line taken by the man in whom he had expected to find a boon companion was regarded as neither more nor less than a personal insult. He tried good fellowship; he tried coarse laughter. He even endeavoured to enlist Dr. Custance by jeering at him as to his probable loss of a portion of his income, but Dr. Custance smiled indolently and took the whole affair as a jest. And as the days passed Norman Strange saw less and less of either of the other two men. He drifted gradually into spending the greater part of his time with Mrs. Custance. In the intervals between his darkest hours—intervals, each one of which saw him more nearly his old self—she was at once a rest and an occupation to him. His readings to her diverged rapidly in all directions. There was hardly any point on which they touched on which she did not lack informa-

tion, and to his youthful energy in imparting knowledge the fact that his pupil was rather dull was hardly a drawback. She was apparently never tired of listening, and the ardour of youth was never tired of laying down the law. She evidently looked up with timid admiration to his learning, and his intellect generally, and an instinct of kindly superiority towards her developed in him rapidly. He had been conscious now and then, even from the very first, of being rather sorry for her, and this feeling, too, developed with time, though he hardly knew why. No one seemed to consider her, and her life seemed to him on the whole a grey affair.

And still as the weeks went on; as the struggle grew less painful, and he became more and more himself; as his old chivalry, his old enthusiasm for truth and justice and

right revived in him again ; an uneasy sense of some as yet undefined demand made on his manhood by Alice Eade grew upon him. It would not have been like him to reflect that, after all, the wrongs—even if she should have wrongs—of a stray young woman in the village could be no concern of his. He thought vaguely that she was a protégée of Mrs. Custance's ; that the dreadful fellowship he himself had acknowledged with Caton constituted some kind of indefinite claim on him, but probably his desire to protect her if she should need protection went deeper than either of these fanciful causes, and had its root in inbred quixotism. He knew that the girl met Caton constantly. Once, knowing that Caton was waiting for her, he had walked with her himself down to the village under pretext of a necessity for stamps.

"She doesn't thank me," he said to himself on that occasion. "If she only knew what a brute he is!"

But he did not see his way to enlightening her on the subject either then or at any of their subsequent meetings, though, as has been said, these were frequent. He thought of speaking to Mrs. Custance on the subject, but not being, as he said to himself, "either an old woman or a cad," he found this course also closed to him. Then there grew upon him a conviction that the only thing to be done was for him to "have it out" with Robert Caton.

Nearly two months had passed since his coming to the White House, and it was on an April afternoon that he finally put his characteristically straightforward but somewhat desperate resolution into effect. It was a desperate resolution because he had

absolutely nothing to go upon; all the significance of the situation lay in such subtleties as would not be expressed in words; and the interview was as futile as it could not fail to be. Caton laughed insolently at him, and if his manner intensified Norman's distrust, it gave him no more tangible ground for it. Caton was master of the situation, and with a coarse jest and laugh in his ears Norman left him abruptly, conscious of having put himself hopelessly in the wrong, and burning with impotent indignation. He took his hat and burst out of the house, thinking that a walk would cool him and settle his disturbed thoughts. He took a short cut down a lane to the high-road—a lane little used except by the inmates of the White House—and turning a corner sharply he came upon a sight that tended little to compose him. Alice Eade

was sauntering to and fro evidently waiting for some one. Norman Strange pulled up short.

"Good evening," he said.

"Good evening, Mr. Strange," she answered carelessly, though her colour had heightened considerably. They were very close together in the narrow lane, and at the moment, from the opposite direction to that in which Norman had come, an old man appeared. They drew back to let him pass, and as Norman recognised the acknowledged scandal-monger of the village he turned away with an irrepressible gesture of annoyance, and cut at the weeds in the hedgerow with his stick. It seemed to him that the old man must inevitably put upon Alice Eade's presence in the little-used lane the construction that he himself had put upon it.

If any other possibility occurred to the

girl it seemed to amuse her rather than otherwise, for as the old man passed she turned to Norman with a mischievous toss of her head, and a sparkle of roguery in her eyes, and said lightly :

"It's a splendid evening for a walk, isn't it, Mr. Strange ?"

Norman did not answer her. He watched the old man out of sight and then turned quickly towards her.

"Miss Eade," he said, quickly and impulsively, "hadn't you better go home ?"

And then he coloured like a girl, lifted his hat hurriedly, and disappeared round the turn of the lane.

CHAPTER IX.

"THERE, Mrs. Custance! That's as fine a bit of descriptive writing as you can meet anywhere! There is another bit here, now!" Norman Strange took up the book, which he had laid down as he spoke in a tone full of fire and animation, and began to turn the leaves eagerly over.

He was sitting by the table in the dining-room, his chair pushed back from it, his legs stretched out under it, his folded arms resting upon it in an attitude of concentrated mental energy and physical unconsciousness that was characteristic of him. He was surrounded by a confusion of books of all

descriptions. Opposite him, with her needlework in her hand, sat Mrs. Custance. She had been listening to his spirited reading with her head bent over the work, in and out of which her needle moved rather slowly; and as he stopped speaking she lifted her head, either as though in expectation of the coming extract or as though the sudden cessation of sound had interrupted some train of thought in her mind, and looked across the table at him as he sat engrossed in his search.

The searching sunlight of a bright May day fell full upon his face as he faced the open window, lighting up unsparingly every line of it; and it fell upon a face so different from the haggard, miserable mask that Norman Strange had worn on his first coming to the White House, that the very features were hardly recognisable as the same. The constraint was gone from it;

the bitterness was gone from it; the despair was gone from it. It was still pale, but no longer with the pallor of ill-health; it was still thin, but it was the thinness of an intellectual man in excellent physical training. The eyes were bright and clear, and the whole face was alight and aglow with interest, energy, and life.

It was nearly three months now since Norman Strange had determined to retrieve the past, and he had never wavered. To all intents and purposes he was now his old self again; on the surface, indeed, strangely his own self; youthful, confident, eager as ever; unaltered, apparently, by all that he had suffered. The developements and changes brought about by his bitter experience and his valiant self-conquest, lay in the depths of his nature; in an added strength; in a purity and steadiness of principle having its root

now in the deliberate choice of manhood rather than in the unstable enthusiasm of youth; in a germ which life had yet to develope of that peculiar sympathy and tenderness for humanity which only sin and repentance can produce.

He turned the pages of his book impetuously, and Mrs. Custance watched him quietly. Their two faces were a curious contrast. His so alert, intellectual and expressive; hers so wanting in life, so utterly without that glow and colour that comes from within, so subdued and insignificant. And yet as she watched him there seemed to pass from his face to hers a strange, faint, ghostly reflection of his brightness. Exactly what it was or in which of her pale, dull features it lay, it would have been impossible to say; but it was there and her whole face was changed by it.

"Here it is, Mrs. Custance!" exclaimed Norman at last. "I think you'll like this!" He was very careful to adapt his selections to her capacity, taking a kindly, lofty pride in not "going over the poor little woman's head," as he had said to himself once. "Just listen to this!"

But Mrs. Custance was not destined to listen after all, though she took up her work again and prepared obediently to do so. Norman Strange's first sentence was cut short by the entrance of the servant with a note for her mistress, and as Mrs. Custance took it her face changed very slightly and was its subdued self again.

"I'm very sorry," she said apologetically to Norman as the servant left the room. "I won't read it yet. Please go on, if you don't mind."

"There's no hurry, Mrs. Custance," he

returned, with a certain gracious condescension that was too frankly youthful to be unpleasant. "We've been very hard at work. Let us take a rest. I don't know how you can suggest keeping that important-looking document waiting," he added with a laugh.

"It's from the Warrens at Sletton," she answered; "Kathleen Warren's writing is so large. I wonder what it can be about?"

She took up the envelope hesitatingly and opened it as he said:

"That's the young lady we pulled out of a ditch the other day, isn't it?"

"Yes," she answered. "It is an invitation for a tennis-party on Friday." She read it through with a certain careful precision — an invitation was a rare circumstance and one of rather overwhelming

importance to her—and then with a faint, nervous flush in her cheeks she said very tentatively: "They will be so pleased if you will go over there with us for the tennis-party. They want us all to go. Will you"—she hesitated—"will you care about it?"

She handed the letter timidly to him and took up her work again. During his first weeks at the White House, Norman Strange had given it to be understood that he would go nowhere. All invitations extended to him out of the mixture of curiosity and compassion felt by the country round for Dr. Custance's "patients" were, indeed, abhorrent to him in his morbid misery, and even since his recovery he had avoided introductions. He had made the acquaintance of the Miss Warren in question, however — the

pretty daughter of some rich people living about three miles away — in an unconventional manner, by helping her in a difficulty with an obstinate pony, and he answered Mrs. Custance cheerily as he glanced over the letter.

"I will go with pleasure, Mrs. Custance, if you think of going. Rather jolly sort of affair, I should think?"

"They know every one for miles round," returned Mrs. Custance with a faint sigh, as if the prospect before her were terrible to her shyness. "Yes, we shall go, I expect. Mr. Caton is asked. I wonder whether he will be well enough to go?"

She spoke the last words in her ordinary hesitating voice, but in the most matter-of-fact way. Her own intense distaste to going out with Robert Caton had never been

of the faintest consequence to any one, and it never occurred to her to complain. Norman glanced at her now with a quick flash of pity, which the thought of her in connection with Caton always stirred in him, and said rather constrainedly :

"Dr. Custance considers him almost recovered, I believe."

A sudden suspension of Norman's anxieties for Alice Eade had been brought about the very day after his meeting with her in the lane by an accident to Robert Caton, which, trivial to another man, threatened serious results to him. He broke his arm and was laid up for a fortnight with sufficient fever to give Dr. Custance a great deal of trouble. And before he was about again another event occurred that made it unlikely that he would have any further opportunities of rousing Norman's ire as

far as Mrs. Custance's handsome protégée was concerned. Alice Eade's grandmother, and only relation, an old woman who had long been ailing, died suddenly, and left her alone. She had no means of supporting herself in Thornsdyke, and Mrs. Custance arranged for her going without delay to a small dressmaking firm in Newcastle, as apprentice. It had seemed probable at first that she would have left the village before Robert Caton was downstairs again, and Norman had dismissed all perturbation on her behalf from his mind. Her departure had been delayed for one reason and another more than once; Robert Caton had been about now for more than a fortnight, and she was still alone in the cottage that had been her grandmother's; but to Norman the latter arrangement was so temporary a state of things, he looked upon the whole affair as

so completely and necessarily over, that no return of his former vague uneasiness was possible to him. He no more thought her choice of a subject a curious coincidence than did Mrs. Custance herself, when the latter, after the short silence that followed his last words, said, with the mixture of timidity and confidence which was the outcome of her constant intercourse with Norman, and which made her manner to him when they were alone together quite different from her manner to the rest of her world:

"I hoped Alice would have gone to Newcastle on Friday, but they have put her off again this morning."

"You will miss her very much, I'm afraid, Mrs. Custance."

At the same moment there came the tap at the door that Norman Strange knew now as well as Mrs. Custance did, and in answer

to the latter's rather surprised "Come in!" Alice Eade in person opened the door. She was dressed in a plain black dress, and perhaps it was because neither of them was used to its new setting, that her beauty struck both Norman Strange and Mrs. Custance — though their respective impressions differed considerably in distinctness of outline—as being absolutely startling.

"I know you didn't expect me this morning," she said to Mrs. Custance, and her vigorous, self-confident tone was a little quicker and more resonant than usual. "But I thought perhaps——" She left her sentence unfinished, a very unusual thing with her, and glancing at Norman said carelessly: "Good morning, Mr. Strange."

His first meeting with her after their brief interview in the lane had been somewhat embarrassing to Norman, though he

had carried it off with himself with a high hand. Perhaps it was fortunate that it did not occur until after her grandmother's death had necessarily thrown their last parting to some extent into the background of her thoughts; at any rate the slightest possible undercurrent in her manner to him, half mocking, half scornful, constituted all the notice she apparently cared to give it, and on the few subsequent occasions of their meeting her manner to him had been simply careless. Now, however, as he returned her greeting, Norman wondered idly whether he had done anything to offend her, or whether she was simply annoyed at not finding Mrs. Custance alone, for though her tone was carelessness itself, her eyes, as she looked towards him from Mrs. Custance, changed to a look of hardness that was almost defiance.

Acting on his last supposition he said easily :

" Well, Mrs. Custance, I ought to do an hour's work before dinner, and I will go and do it. You are going to plunge into the mysteries of needlework with Miss Eade, no doubt, and I am very grateful to her for bringing me up to the point."

And with a smile and a pleasant parting word he left the room. He was working steadily now at his old law work ; and he was quite unconscious that he owed his first impetus towards renewed study, not as he believed, to his own energy, but to a few timid incoherent words uttered in a low, uncertain voice, in a pause in one of his monologues to Mrs. Custance.

No sooner was the dining-room door shut upon him than Alice Eade crossed the room quickly and stood close to Mrs. Cus-

tance, looking down at her as she sat. The handsome face with its bold, decided outlines and its great black eyes, was no more capable of delicate shades of expression than the nature behind was capable of delicate shades of feeling. But the broader, stronger passions with which that nature was aglow were always distinctly legible upon her features, and as one impulse gave swift place to another in her undisciplined heart the change was as swiftly reflected upon her face. It had changed now, curiously and completely, since Norman Strange's departure.

"You don't mind my coming?" she said abruptly.

"Mind!" repeated Mrs. Custance with gentle wonder. "Of course not, Alice! Is it something you want to ask me about that dress? Sit down, my dear."

But Alice did not sit down. She moved

with a vigorous, restless movement to the window, and stood with her back to Mrs. Custance as she answered: "No—I mean yes!"

She asked a trivial question on the subject of the dress in question, and listened to the simple answer, still standing with her face turned away, and apparently without paying much attention, for after Mrs. Custance finished her explanation there was a pause. Then the girl turned suddenly and looked down at her again.

"What a lot of trouble you've taken about me, Mrs. Custance!" she said in an odd brusque tone, which harmonised strangely with the rough affection on her face. "What do you do it for?"

Mrs. Custance smiled faintly. She thought Alice was odd to-day, but she was used to vigorous unconventionality from her.

"I'm very fond of you, Alice," she said simply.

"It's very foolish of you!" said the girl with sudden energy. "Yes, it is, Mrs. Custance. Oh, I know! You think because I'm not the vixen they make me out down in Thornsdyke that I'm all right, but I'm not, and that's flat. P'raps you'll be sorry one day!"

"I don't think so, Alice."

"I know you don't!" was the quick, vehement response. "That's because you're like what you are, Mrs. Custance. You think you've seen something good in me, I tell you, and you think that it must be all through the same. You wouldn't ever see anything wrong if it wasn't as plain as print." The girl paused a moment, and the affection in her face was tempered by what in a more refined nature would have been pity, but

which became in her coarser physique contempt, for the simplicity of the small worn face raised to hers. "Why don't you see how bad everybody is?" she said vehemently. "Then you'd know how much better you are than everybody, and you wouldn't let yourself be so put upon all round. Why, there isn't any one in the place but me knows what you're like—how kind you are, and how patient, and how you put up with one."

The face on which her eyes were fixed with a kind of angry excitement was patient enough, in truth, but it was also exceedingly bewildered. Mrs. Custance, indeed, had hardly taken in the actual words addressed to her in her surprise at their general drift.

"Alice!" she said remonstratingly, "Alice! my dear!'

"You ought to think more of yourself,

Mrs. Custance. That's what you ought. What's the use of letting every one look down on you?" She stopped abruptly, touched apparently by something in the blue eyes to which no touch of offended dignity had come. Quite suddenly all the coarse contempt and aggression passed from her flushed face to be succeeded by a passionate self-loathing. With a sharp stamp of her foot, the awkward, impotent gesture of an unemotional class where a girl of another class would have flung herself upon her knees beside the woman to whom she spoke, Alice cried passionately: "I ought to be ashamed of myself! I ought to be ashamed! When I know how good you are! Mrs. Custance, Mrs. Custance, you know I'm grateful, you do know I'm grateful?"

There was a passionate appeal, a passionate self-reproach in her voice, and Mrs. Custance

rose hurriedly and took one of the strong hot hands into both her own small pale ones.

"Of course I know, Alice," she said; "don't be so excited. I don't know what you've been talking about, or what you mean, and I don't think you know either, but you know that I am always your friend."

Good and bad, high and low, black and white, the inevitable elements brought to the making of every human being from everlasting to everlasting; in what proportion these are found combined by nature or by developement at certain moments of a man's life, of which no other human being can say, "It was then" or "then"; it is on this that the subsequent turn of every individual life upwards or downwards depends. Unknown to either Alice Eade's moment came to her as she stood there with her hand in Mrs. Custance's hand, and she

followed her strongest bent. Mrs. Custance's words brought back her self-confidence, and it came back hard and coarse and slightly contemptuous of the gentleness, the want of quickness, in a mind as slow to apprehend as to resent. Her affection remained, but it was her affection at its lowest, its least perceptive and appreciative.

"You've always been kind to me, Mrs. Custance," she said, and her tone now, compared to that in which she had spoken before, was almost careless; "I'm sure I ask your pardon if I've said anything I shouldn't. There've been so many changes, you see, and what with one thing and another I'm upset, I expect, and talk nonsense. I must go home now."

The brilliancy and glow had come back to her face as she spoke, and as she said good-bye her beauty struck Mrs. Custance

again with the vague shock of realisation she had felt on her entrance. She was hardly conscious of any surprise when the beautiful face, in what seemed to her at the moment the natural conscious pride of its beauty, bent suddenly and kissed her.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Custance," said the girl, "Good-bye." And then she was gone.

There was a vague sense of shock, of bewilderment, and perplexity, in Mrs. Custance's mind when she was left alone, and its traces were still visible in her manner when luncheon-time came. Alice's visit had caused her to forget some trifling order she had had to give with regard to Robert Caton's room, and the faltering apology with which she met her husband's sarcastic comments was uttered with eyes that were unusually frightened and deprecating. Dr. Custance himself, indeed, was unusually

severe, but Robert Caton, who still looked weak and shattered and wore a sling, took the affair very lightly, and was altogether in boisterous spirits.

"It's no matter," he said carelessly, when Mrs. Custance apologised to him. "It's no matter. You'll soon be rid of me altogether. A good riddance, too, eh, Mrs. Custance? There's one fellow here who thinks so, I know," and he turned with a rough laugh to Norman. "Heard the good news, Strange? I'm going to relieve you of my company for six months at least. Off in a day or two."

CHAPTER X.

"By-the-bye, Mrs. Custance, I hear that Mr. Caton is going away immediately. I suppose he is incurable, poor man. Dear, dear, a nice-looking young man, too, and very agreeable except for that unfortunate failing. It does seem very sad. When is he going?"

"I think—that is—he is going to-morrow morning. Dr. Custance — Mr. Caton — he has been ill, you know, and he thinks a thorough change——"

It was a lovely May afternoon, hot with the breath of coming summer, fresh and gracious with the breath of passing spring. The large gardens of Sletton Court, the

home of the young lady extricated by Norman Strange from a ditch, were looking their very best, and to the shy eyes of Mrs. Custance the lawns presented a bewildering confusion of people; all constantly moving to and fro, all talking and laughing; all, as far as the female contingent was concerned, in bright summer frocks, which made her look more insignificant and dowdy than ever.

She was sitting under a tree on a seat which she had instinctively chosen as being rather out of the way, but not sufficiently so to be conspicuous, talking to, or rather being talked to by, a stout, elderly lady of considerable presence and apparently unlimited curiosity. Mrs. Custance had in all innocent unconsciousness, through sheer nervous inability to carry on a conversation, foiled several attempts on the part of her interlocutor to find out the nature and extent of

Dr. Custance's income, and a short pause had ensued, during which Mrs. Custance's eyes had wandered towards the tennis-courts, which lay to the left on a lower lawn. She had started and turned her eyes rather hurriedly to her companion, apparently self-convicted of wandering attention, as that lady resumed the conversation with the question as to Robert Caton's proceedings.

A thorough change after his illness was in fact the reason given by Robert Caton for his departure, and, as Mrs. Custance had said, he was to leave Thornsdyke on the following morning. The three days which had elapsed between his announcement of his intention and Mrs. Warren's tennis-party had seen all his arrangements made and his very train fixed, and these facts had had a strong influence on the atmosphere of the White House for those three days. The personal

contentment that Mrs. Custance felt in them was as nothing against the access of nervousness and hesitating timidity produced in her by the increase of sarcasm and cold contempt towards her which was the outcome of the effect upon her husband's temper of the anticipated loss of his "patient." Her eyes grew frightened now, and she hoped vaguely that her companion would not speak to him of Robert Caton as she saw her husband coming towards them as they sat together under the trees.

Dr. Custance came commissioned by his hostess, he said, to see if the lady who was sitting by his wife would take some tea. The lady in question proving more than willing, and his wife hurriedly declining his careless invitation to herself, the two moved away together. Left alone, Mrs. Custance's eyes wandered back again

instinctively to the tennis-courts, and as they did so up from the lower lawn came Norman Strange and the master of the house, a young man of about his own age, Mrs. Warren's son. The former saw her, made her a little gesture of greeting with his racquet, and passed on laughing and talking with the other and disappeared into the house.

It was many months since Norman had enjoyed himself with the simple exhilaration of young animal spirits that he was feeling this afternoon. In the old days he had delighted in society, and it was significant of the thoroughly healthy tone which his mind had regained, that no sooner had he found himself on Mrs. Warren's lawn in the midst of a crowd of young and apparently happy people than his spirits had begun to rise. He gave

not a thought to his position, it never occurred to him in his renewed self-confidence and zest of life that he was there as Dr. Custance's "patient," and he threw himself into the spirit of the thing with even more than his old enjoyment and animation. He had talked and laughed and made himself agreeable and useful by handing tea and ices with unfailing readiness and ease; and, as a well-bred young man of the world was rather a novelty in that quiet country place, he had attracted a good deal of attention. Finally he had accepted from the young master of the house the loan of the necessary shoes, etc., and had played tennis with considerable energy and science and immense enjoyment, until young Warren came up to him as he stood, hot, eager, and triumphant after a long set, and said with a laugh:

"You've worked like a horse, and I'm sure you must be done up. Come in with me and have a drink." And Norman, excited, pleased, and responsive, answered lightly:

"Thanks. A drink would suit me capitally."

Young Warren had, of course, heard earlier in the afternoon that Norman Strange had come with the Custances, but seeing him so bright, popular, and pleasant it had never entered his head to identify him as one of the doctor's patients. He supposed Norman to be a visitor at the White House, and he had taken a great fancy to him. The talk between them was quick and interested as they passed up the garden, and as they entered the house the young host interrupted himself in a brisk hunting anecdote to say:

"I'm taking you to my smoking-room, by-the-bye. I always make it a point with my mother on these occasions to have some drinks put there that a fellow may have a chance of cooling down quietly. Who's here, I wonder?"

He opened a door as he spoke and disclosed a room in which there were about half-a-dozen men. He introduced Norman to two or three of those near the door, pressed him to help himself from the trays on the table, and departed with cheery zeal to do his duty elsewhere.

"You've been playing a hard set!" observed one of the men, a tall, muscular young fellow to whom his host had particularly commended the new-comer, as Norman's countenance became temporarily eclipsed by a large tumbler of lemon and soda. "Take a cigarette and a chair."

"Thanks!" returned Norman readily. It was delightful to him to find himself once more in a smoking-room with "the right sort of fellow," as he mentally designated his present companions as he glanced round him. He had seen on his first entrance that Robert Caton was one of a group at the far end of the room; but in his elation of spirits he was prepared to ignore, and if necessary to tolerate him on this, the last day on which they would be even nominally associated. And in the ardour of the conversation that followed—a conversation on a neighbouring election, which had been interrupted by his entrance and in which he was immediately given a footing—he entirely forgot his fellow "patient's" vicinity until an opinion advanced by him was suddenly commented on from the other end of the room

in the coarse voice and manner he knew so well.

"You don't believe in wholesale pledges, eh, Strange? That's something new from you!"

Robert Caton sauntered up as he spoke and stood by the table, looking down at Norman with an indescribably evil shadow on his face as the latter leant back in his chair, one leg thrown carelessly over the other, cigarette in hand, animated, and enthusiastic. All the scores that had accumulated in his unwholesome mind against the man who had done what he had not even wished to do had summed themselves together as he sat at the other end of the room watching and listening.

"You believe in the blue ribbon, I take it!" he continued with a sneer, as Norman, apparently occupied with the ashes of his

cigarette, did not answer for the moment. "Come, now, Strange, you believe in the blue ribbon?"

A silence had perforce fallen on the other men in the group on Caton's interruption, a silence tinged with a perceptible chill. But in spite of themselves there was a little stir of interest among them on his last words. Only one or two, as it happened, knew Caton and not one knew anything of his relations with Norman Strange. Norman had spent the last quarter of an hour arguing brilliantly in a youthful, theoretical way against pledges, written or unwritten, as destructive to a man's strength of will, and the men who had noticed his adherence to lemon and soda were curious as to what he would say. There was a moment's pause and then he looked Caton full in the face and said quietly:

"No! I don't believe in the blue ribbon."

Caton laughed.

"Don't like the name, eh? Well, blue ribbon, taking the pledge, total abstinence, call it what you like, you believe in the thing itself?"

"No!" Norman spoke slowly and still more quietly as if with something of an effort. "I don't!"

They were looking one another full in the face; Caton with an evil, insolent, sneering challenge; Norman with his expression indescribably alert behind his temporary quiet; and the other men remained instinctively silent as if watching a duel. There was another laugh from Caton, a laugh the ring of which seemed to release some of the youthful spirit which Norman was apparently holding in check, and the former said:

"You don't believe in total abstinence!

Why, man, you're a total abstainer yourself! Stand to your colours."

There was another movement among the men round as Norman made a spirited movement, as if to speak. Without in the least understanding what was going on they began to feel the position strained, and one young fellow stretched out his hand for the whisky bottle.

"What nonsense!" he said. "Here, Mr. Strange, let me put some whisky into that squash of yours and make him feel small."

With a quick instinctive movement Norman moved his glass to avoid the proffered whisky, and Caton exclaimed:

"Not he! His will's so strong, I tell you, that he's afraid it wouldn't get exercise enough if he once began upon whisky!"

His sneering eyes were full upon Norman's as he spoke, and under the

intolerable taunt in them a boyish flash of indignation leapt into Norman's face, breaking down on the instant all his forced reserve, and he stretched out his glass impetuously to the man who held the whisky.

"That's a lie!" he cried impetuously, answering the eyes with which the other taunted him with being afraid. "Here, let's have some whisky!"

The quick splash of the liquid and another laugh followed, and simultaneously with these and most incongruously there came a low, hurried woman's voice from the door.

"I beg your pardon!" it said; "I was looking for Mr. Strange."

Mrs. Custance stood in the doorway, her small face white to the very lips, her hands clasping her sunshade in an intense grip. She did not seem to be aware that every man in the room had turned at the sound

of her voice; she fixed her eyes full upon Norman Strange as he sprang up, setting his tumbler of whisky on the table, and came quickly towards her; and she went on in the same low, hurried, but quite unhesitating voice:

"I came to see if you are ready, Mr. Strange. Mrs. Ward has offered to take back two of our party, and I thought perhaps you would not mind going with me now!"

The next moment with a few rapid words of farewell, and without a glance at Caton, he had followed her through the doorway and out of the house with a rather pale face.

The kindly old lady who had been rather surprised at Mrs. Custance's ready acceptance of her offer of two seats in her carriage, was no less surprised to find both her companions equally silent. Mrs. Custance was even more painfully confused and embar-

rassed than was usual with her, and Norman Strange hardly spoke. Mrs. Custance had by no means recovered herself, even when they reached home, and as they walked in silence up the garden, though Norman was too preoccupied to notice it, she was trembling from head to foot.

"Please, ma'am, Mrs. Johnson is in the kitchen and wants to speak to you very particular," said the servant to her as she opened the door, and Norman passed upstairs to his room as she went into the dining-room, telling the girl to bring Mrs. Johnson in.

Half an hour later he came downstairs again, his face grave still, but no longer painfully so. He had forgotten Mrs. Johnson apparently, or had concluded that she was gone, for he opened the dining-room door and then prepared to retreat again hastily as

he became aware of a homely figure in a shawl standing with Mrs. Custance by the window. But at the sound of his voice as he apologised, Mrs. Custance turned quickly to him, her blue eyes shocked and pitiful, her lips trembling.

"Oh, Mr. Strange!" she exclaimed, "what can I do? What can I do? Alice is gone!"

"Gone!" he repeated enquiringly, thinking of the girl's apprenticeship in Newcastle. "You did not expect that she would go so soon, Mrs. Custance?"

"I did not expect her to go at all!" she answered, her voice so shaken as to be hardly audible. "I mean, it's not to Newcastle she's gone! She's gone away from me—away from all of us, and I don't know where she is! Oh, Mr. Strange, don't you understand? Don't you understand?"

CHAPTER XI.

A SHORT, sharp exclamation broke from Norman Strange as Mrs. Custance's shaken, incoherent words stopped suddenly, and it was followed by a moment's dead silence. The woman from the village had turned quickly towards Norman on his entrance, and was looking at him with a pair of sharp curious eyes. Mrs. Custance had turned away her quivering face, and one hand was working nervously at the window curtain, by which she stood, as though she tried instinctively even then to suppress herself and her own emotion. Norman stood just as her first words—startled from her ap-

parently by her irrepressible distress—had arrested him, almost in the doorway. Then Norman shut the door, and coming further into the room, said in a tone that was very low and grave:

"Is it not possible that there may be some mistake, Mrs. Custance? Will you tell me what is known?"

Apparently the sympathetic voice let loose the current of her great distress, for the tears fell fast down her cheeks, and she tried in vain to answer him. Mrs. Johnson, who was by no means incapacitated from speech, in whose frame of mind, indeed, excitement and interest seemed to predominate, answered for her. She was the woman who had been with Alice Eade in the cart which Norman had stopped in the lane on the night of his arrival at Thornsdyke.

"It's very little as is known, sir, and that's the fact!" she began; "but that little's certain, and there's only one way it points. It's something to be thankful for, I'm sure, that it's come to light when it has!"—the reason for Mrs. Johnson's thankfulness was somewhat obscure—"and it was all along of my going by accident into Wellborough this morning, by train." Wellborough was the market-town. "I was going by the ten o'clock train," continued Mrs. Johnson, embarking on her story with a certain enjoyment of it, "and I got up to the station early, and while I was waiting, Tom-at-the-station, he comes up to me and says, 'So Miss Eade's gone to stay for a bit in Wellborough!' Tom, he's had a hankering after Alice this long time, for all she never give him so much as a look, and he's always got something to say

to me about her, thinking as she and me's been more on terms, in a way of speaking, than her and other Thornsdyke folks. So I says to him, 'Oh, has she?' I says. 'It's the first I've heard of it.' I did think then as it was rather strange like, that I should never have heard of her havin' friends in Wellborough, but I didn't give it no more than a passing thought, and I shouldn't have again as likely as not; but as I was a-going out of the Wellborough station, who should I happen to meet but Mrs. Williams, which is my master's cousin, sir, and just as I was a-givin' her good day, and goin' on, she says to me, 'Alice Eade's gone to her place, then, Mrs. Johnson, and a good riddance for Thornsdyke.' Mrs. Williams she never could see anything in Alice. 'I see her settin' off for London yesterday mornin', and it would have been

more becomin' in her, to my way o' thinkin', to been seen off by some friend as wasn't a young gentleman.' 'Setting off for London, Mrs. Williams!' I says. 'Alice's place ain't in London at all, nor she isn't going to it yet awhile, either. You must a' been mistook.' 'Mistook, Mrs. Johnson,' says she. 'Now, I ask you only, is Alice Eade the kind of girl to be mistook in?' And the long and short of it is, sir, Mrs. Williams was as positive as she was of her own name that she'd seen Alice Eade see'd off to London yesterday mornin' by a gentleman. She couldn't say that she'd know the gentleman again—for I thought it right, as you'll believe, by that time, sir, to ask her very particular. He had on a kind of flapping coat thing. But she was sure he was a gentleman, and a young gentleman, sir."

Mrs. Johnson had spoken the last sentence in a peculiar tone that was at once lofty and confidential, and the eyes which she had fastened more intently than ever on Norman's face as she spoke were quite preternaturally keen and inquisitive. Neither of her auditors, however, noticed either tone or look, and directly she had taken breath she went on again.

"The mistakes I made with my shoppin' at Wellborough, sir, is past believin', I was that put about and upset, and the very first thing as I did when I got back home was to go round to Alice's place. My heart, I do assure you, sir, was in my mouth as I knocked at the door. I knocked, and I shook it, and I tapped at the window, and it was as quiet as a graveyard. She was gone, sure enough!"

Mrs. Johnson drew a long breath, as

one who has reached the climax of her story, and paused. There was a moment's silence, and then Norman said gently to Mrs. Custance:

"When did you see her last?"

"I've not seen her for three or four days," she answered brokenly. "Not since that morning when she came unexpectedly—you know! She sent me a message to say she couldn't come the next day. Oh, poor girl! What can we do?"

There was nothing immediate to be done, as Norman told her gently. He volunteered to go to Wellborough to make further enquiries, an offer which, as throwing doubt on her evidence, caused Mrs. Johnson to toss her head; he even volunteered to go to London and see if anything could be discovered at the terminus there, an offer which produced a still more

pronounced toss of the head and a sniff of much emphasis from the same quarter.

Mrs. Custance's only thought, apparently, was the girl herself, and it was not until the interview was perforce drawn to a close by her uneasy sense of the approaching advent of supper-time and her husband, that the thought which occupied the minds of the other two of this oddly constituted trio was put into words with a kind of hesitating daring by Mrs. Johnson, as she darted another keen glance at Norman Strange:

"It's all very well to say where can she be?" she said. "But there's a shorter question than that, Mrs. Custance, if I may take the liberty, that would tell us a deal. Who's the gentleman?"

Mrs. Custance's grieving blue eyes were fixed on her for a moment with a startled expression as though the importance of the

suggested question had only just occurred to her, and as she turned them helplessly on Norman as though appealing to him to answer it, he said to her, speaking gravely, almost sternly :

"You have no idea, Mrs. Custance ?"

"No!" she answered. "None at all! I can't think!"

Mrs. Johnson pursed up her lips into an expression in which were blended importance, mystery, and a certain unconcealed contempt for Mrs. Custance's want of penetration, and finally, moved by her burning desire to discuss the question in more responsive circles, she took her leave.

Meals at the White House, with the incongruous elements they brought together, could never be said to be either genial or sociable occasions. But over the supper which ensued half an hour later there seemed

to hang a strange unusual shadow. The only one of the party whose spirits were unimpaired was Robert Caton, and he was even more than ordinarily boisterous and insolent in manner. Dr. Custance was out of temper; he had a summons to one of his few patients which obliged him to go out before supper was over; and while he was in the room he hardly spoke, except to visit his annoyance on his wife in the cutting sarcasm from which she always shrank. Norman was very silent, very stern, utterly unlike himself; to Caton he spoke not a word.

That Mrs. Custance's voice should be hardly heard was by no means an unusual circumstance; but her face, her eyes reddened with her recent tears, was confused and bewildered with distress. After the departure of Dr. Custance she seemed to notice Norman's tacit refusal to address

Caton, and that distress deepened. Perhaps the remembrance of what she must have seen and heard as she stood in the doorway of the smoking-room at Sletton Court suggested to her the thought that Norman was resenting Caton's conduct on that occasion, and inspired her with a vague dread lest that resentment should develope further, for apparently she found it almost impossible to bring herself to leave them alone together. As long as it was possible, much longer than was usual with her, she sat at the table, her pale face growing paler and her hands trembling, and when at last she rose, it was with the sudden, hasty movements of desperation. At the very door she turned and looked back again as though hesitating—looked at Caton leaning back in his chair, careless, satisfied, hilarious; at Norman, standing holding the door for her

in stern silence. The next moment she had moved on mechanically, and the door had closed behind her.

It was very still and peaceful in the drawing-room, and either that or the sudden relaxation of the strain with which the mental atmosphere of the dining-room had been charged had its effect on her. She was trembling less, and the colour was returning to her lips, when it was suddenly startled away again, and she rose abruptly from her chair, as the silence was broken by an angry voice from the dining-room. The passage that separated the rooms was narrow, the walls thin, and though she could hear no words she could distinctly distinguish that the first voice was answered by a second, insolent and sneering, and that it replied again more hotly than before. White as ashes, and trembling from head to foot, she

stood as though absolutely unable to move, as the voices rose and fell in quick succession, getting always higher and higher, until at last as a violent retort brought almost the very words to her ears, she suddenly crossed the room and opened the drawing-room door just as the hall door close to her right hand was opened by her husband, who stopped short on seeing her. She did not hear his question to her. She was wholly absorbed in the sudden silence in the dining-room that had succeeded the last passionate words; a silence which had arrested her in the drawing-room doorway, and in which she seemed to hear the quick, hot breath of two angry men standing face to face. It lasted for an instant only, and then she and her husband alike heard Norman Strange's voice ring out, full and passionate:

"Tell me where she is?"

There was a reply, an insolent, sneering reply, of which the words were inaudible. Then, before Dr. Custance could take the few steps between the hall door and the dining-room, there was a fierce exclamation :

"You scoundrel!" the sudden sound of a blow, a heavy thud, and the dining-room door was dashed open by Norman Strange, his face white, his eyes flashing, apparently beside himself with passion.

"You'd better go to him," he cried to Dr. Custance, apparently not even seeing the shrinking figure in the drawing-room doorway. "I've knocked him down, and I'll do it again whenever he's ready!" And before Dr. Custance had well taken in his words the front door shut behind him with a violent bang.

He dashed down the garden and started up the road at a pace of which he was no

more conscious than he was of any destination for his hasty footsteps. Every pulse was leaping and throbbing, every nerve was strained and tense, he was conscious of nothing but such passion as perhaps only early manhood knows ; the hot, hardly controllable passion of youth combined with a man's fury of contempt for something unutterably base and degraded. For more than half an hour he walked at the top of his speed with no coherent thought, with no conscious volition, simply because the rapid movement supplied some outlet for the surging force within him ; the surging force which rose and shook him again and again until at last time and the physical exertion began to take effect. Very slowly and gradually the power of thought and consideration came back to him. Out of the red-hot glow of passion facts began to stand forth, he began to recollect and to

reflect in detail, with a calmness which grew always sterner and sterner as his excitement subsided.

On the instant, as Mrs. Johnson spoke of a gentleman in connection with Alice Eade's disappearance, the thought of Caton had leapt into his mind, and the conviction that he was indeed the man had grown with every breath he drew. The temporary suspension of his original doubts and fears as to the flirtation carried on by Caton with the girl gave them double distinctness in the retrospect, and endued his present suspicion with a sense of absolute certainty that seemed to carry it out of the bounds of conjecture and to make it knowledge. And at the same time the thought that his fears should have been so lightly suspended, that he should have been so careless, so easily blinded, complicated the situation by adding to it for

him the bitterness of self-reproach. It was characteristic of his boyish, impulsive chivalry that he should feel himself thus additionally responsible, additionally called upon to make some stand for womanhood in the person of the missing girl.

Exactly what his intentions had been when he found himself alone with Caton after supper he tried in vain to recall now as he walked along the country road, with the quiet summer darkness all about him and the fierce heat of passion subsiding in his heart. Had he himself begun, or had some covert sneer of Caton's given him an opening, he asked himself? One word had led to another, Caton's answers kindling in him an ever strengthening fire of indignation until at last, Caton, not perfectly sober, had avowed the truth, and avowed it with a brutal boast and an allusion to the girl which had destroyed

Norman's last remnant of self-control. His passionate demand as to her present whereabouts had been met by a coarse taunt, and on the instant a sudden, well-directed blow had stretched the other man on the floor at his feet. Much more than this Norman was unable to remember. He was conscious of having rushed out of the room, and he was vaguely aware of having found himself face to face with Dr. Custance in the hall; but of what he had said or done since then he had very little consciousness, until he found himself about two hours later standing once more outside the White House, having made a round of nearly ten miles.

He was quite quiet now; his passion had spent itself, and in its place was a steady, implacable sternness. He had made no plan of future action; he knew that Caton was a coward, and that there was little chance of

their meeting again that night, and for the morrow time and circumstances would develope his course of action. There was no regret in his mind for what had passed, but for the present he was quiescent. He stood a moment before entering the house, and looked up at the quiet night sky and round at the peaceful darkness of the landscape. The wind was sighing gently in the trees, and coming on the fierce excitement through which he had passed, the stillness and peace of the night seemed to suggest a sleeping earth, on which all the inhabitants slept also. Then he opened the hall door softly, lest Mrs. Custance should have gone to bed, and went in.

It was very quiet in the house. The stillness outside, with its calm suggestion of sleep, seemed to be intensified until it was almost oppressive. Its suggestiveness seemed

in some indefinable way to intensify also, and it was no longer of the sleep of a night that it spoke. Norman paused a moment in the hall, vaguely conscious of a change in the atmosphere. All the doors were shut, and he thought that every one must be gone to bed. Then, seeing a light under the dining-room door, he determined to get some water before going upstairs, and crossed the hall with that intent. He opened the dining-room door and stood still suddenly.

Never while he lived could Norman Strange account for, or even define, the awful sense of chill horror that fell upon him in that moment. The room was perfectly quiet and orderly, perhaps even more orderly than usual, the gas was turned down. There was nothing out of the common to be seen, except that on the table there was something long and narrow, covered with a

white sheet. Without knowing why or how he did it, impelled by the horror that had fallen on him as he opened the door, Norman Strange walked mechanically up to the table and lifted the sheet. Beneath it lay Robert Caton—dead.

CHAPTER XII.

"But hadn't they used to be pretty good friends, Drew?"

The man addressed, a little wiry, sharp-faced man, suspended his proceedings with a plane—proceedings which had been merely nominal in the interest of the discussion going on around him, and answered confidentially:

"Well, Mr. Snowdon," he said, "that's according as how you take it. There's no one as can say as they ever saw them thick like, and my boy William, he's said times and again to his mother and me as he didn't believe Mr. Strange and Mr. Caton—poor

gentleman—could abide one another. An' he says, too," he added parenthetically, "as I've told you, sir, he says as the words between 'em before it came to blows that night was something enough to wake the dead. He heard them, and Mrs. Scott's Emma, as is cook at the White House, she heard 'em too, as they was a-sittin' in the kitchen at supper!"

The scene was quaint and picturesque enough. A long, low carpenter's shed, with an odd cross-light from the wide opening into the yard of which its creeper-grown wall formed one side, and a small haphazard pane of glass through which there streamed a ray of light straight from the setting sun. The carpenter himself stood at his bench, and his interlocutor was leaning up against the entrance, a stout, prosperous-looking figure, of the small farmer class, with a stupid, good-

natured face. Farther into the shed, sitting on a pile of newly-sawn wood which gave its peculiar odour to the air, was a white-bearded old man with a bright scarlet waistcoat, and outside, clustering together round the doorway, were three or four women.

The workshop of Joshua Drew, the Thornsdyke carpenter, was the head-quarters of the village as far as gossip was concerned; any one anxious for information as to their neighbours' affairs invariably went to consult its master, and seldom went in vain. On the tragedy which had formed one of the two subjects of excited discussion in Thornsdyke for the last three days, the death of Robert Caton, his information was practically inexhaustible, and had all the majesty of derivation from the fountain-head, since his eldest son officiated in Dr. Custance's house as pageboy. And to his own intense

satisfaction, Joshua Drew had hardly spent a moment alone in his workshop since the news was first known.

"There's some says one thing and some another," he resumed now with an impartial air. "There's some as 'as seen her with one and some with another. Here's Mr. Rogers, now," turning to the old man behind him; he was the old man who had come down the lane when Norman had found Alice Eade waiting, as he believed, for Robert Caton; "here's Mr. Rogers says he's seen her and Mr. Strange as thick as you please in Five-acre Lane."

"Ah!" interrupted a woman by the door, as Mr. Rogers prepared to endorse the carpenter's statement in a quavery treble, "an' I've seen her times out o' mind with Mr. Caton! A shameless hussy!"

"An' that's how it stands, Mr. Snowdon,"

continued Joshua Drew, presenting the woman's words to the farmer with confidential politeness; "some says one thing and some another; but one thing as there ain't no doubt on is as Mr. Strange knocked Mr. Caton down and killed him on the nail."

"I'm sorry to disturb that comfortable conviction, Drew, but such is not the fact!"

There was a sudden start and simultaneous turn of every member of the group in the direction of the indolent, sarcastic voice they all knew well. Unnoticed by any one, Dr. Custance had come down the yard in time to hear the last words, and he stood now confronting the talkers, as they acknowledged his presence in their various ways, with an expression which was by no means pleasant to them.

"I am very glad to have this opportunity of telling you, and I hope — I have no doubt, indeed—that you will each of you go and tell it to somebody else: that Dr. Harding finds that Mr. Caton's death was caused by heart disease. The interesting episode, of which you all seem to know a great deal more than I do, had, he says, nothing in the world to do with it."

There was a moment's dead silence, and then Joshua Drew made a valiant effort to retrieve his position in the eyes of the believers who had witnessed his fall by accepting Dr. Custance's words as a private and confidential communication addressed to himself.

"I'm very glad, indeed, to hear you say so, sir, I'm sure," he said. "Disease of the heart! Well, now, and to think that one never would have thought it! And the

blow had nothing to do with it — it all happened simultaneous like? Well, now!"

"The blow, if there was a blow, had nothing to do with it," returned Dr. Custance, with a look under which a woman on the outskirts of the group hastily and unobtrusively departed.

"Nothing to do with it! To be sure!" responded Joshua Drew. "Well, that makes a wonderful deal o' difference, don't it, now?"

"I don't know so much about that!" The words came in a slow and ruminating voice from the farmer at the door, who was collecting information for the edification of his wife; and his social status bringing him a degree nearer to Dr. Custance than were the other members of the party, made it possible to him to say what they ventured only to think. "It makes a difference in a way,

certainly; but I don't see that it throws much light on which of 'em has done for the girl."

Dr. Custance turned on him quickly, a look of surprise on his face. He knew, of course, of the disappearance of Alice Eade, and he had arrived at a pretty clear estimate of the truth; but he was ignorant of the confusion of mind existing in the village on the subject.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"Well, which of 'em was it, doctor, you see? No offence, I'm sure!" added the man awkwardly.

There was a moment's pause, and then Dr. Custance said callously:

"There is no particular reason, as far as I can see, to suppose that either of my patients had a hand in the affair. The girl, as you all know, was as likely as not to have

plenty of strings to her bow. Anyway, Mr. Caton, poor fellow, is dead, and Mr. Strange leaves Thornsdyke in two days' time; and least said soonest mended."

He turned on his heel as he spoke and left the yard. In Dr. Custance's opinion the non-committal was the only policy that could be relied upon for keeping a man out of situations demanding exertion.

Robert Caton had died of aneurism of the heart. Dr. Custance, going, on Norman's hasty exit, to the prostrate figure visible within the dining-room had found him dead, had guessed the truth, though he had never troubled to acquaint himself accurately with the organic condition of his "patient," and had himself summoned a brother practitioner with an energy and promptitude which only his desire to minimise his own trouble and responsi-

bility could have induced in him. The colleague thus summoned was naturally the one nearest at hand; a very old gentleman whose services were somewhat at a discount in the neighbourhood, and whose easy-going amiability would have rendered him in any case ready to cover a scandal in the house of a brother doctor. But in this case his amiability was in no way taxed. Less medical skill than he possessed would have found no difficulty in ascribing, on examination, a perfectly natural cause for Robert Caton's death; and he announced it as an undoubted fact that the blow and the subsequent fall had been practically without results, since the action of the heart had in all probability failed in the very instant in which the blow fell. The certificate signed by him had assigned as the cause of death a more technical version of the simple state-

ment made by Dr. Custance in Joshua Drew's workshop.

And as Dr. Custance had said, Norman Strange was leaving Thornsdyke immediately. Free as he was from any shadow of blame, the painful interest which must have attached itself to him in the neighbourhood, the painful associations which his present surroundings must hold for him for the future, made it impossible that he should remain. Circumstances made it necessary that he should go, the bare outline of his conduct was determined for him; but behind them, filling them in with life and glow, underlying all the painful solemnity of the original cause, all the self-reproach of which he could not quite divest himself, was an impulse which grew hourly more potent and all-dominating. In the agony of the hour when he believed that he had killed the

man he hated, and in the reaction of relief when he found himself completely exonerated, the last traces of those remains of physical and mental weakness which had made it natural and advantageous to him to stay on at the White House had been finally scorched away. He found himself suddenly ready to face the world again, eager to be at work.

He seemed to himself to be living a strange mental life during the week that elapsed between his consciousness of the necessity for his departure, and that departure as an accomplished fact; a life in which the present was nothing but the meeting-ground of the past and future. The past was past for him now, indeed, as it had never been before. He seemed to stand aloof from it and look at it; he went through all its phases over and over again

with unshrinking steadiness and courage, with a sense of its blackness, which time would only deepen in him. But it was to him as something done and over, of which only the painful memory remained; while before him, glowing and beating with vigorous life, his own to use and work in, lay the future. With every day, almost with every hour, that future became to him more real, more tangible; his plans became more definite, his zest in them grew keener. All his thoughts, like all his hopes, were centred in it, he was already living in it in anticipation. The course of life at the White House in which he had lived for the last three months, during which so much had gradually changed for him, and which he was so soon to leave behind, had no more substance, no more reality for him, now, than the merest shadow of a dream.

One present interest connected solely with the past, and one only, still had vigorous life for him. Of Alice Eade nothing had been heard in Thornsdyke since she left it. Norman knew from the dead man's own lips—and Norman only—why she had left Thornsdyke, and that she was waiting now for Caton somewhere. Where she was he did not know; and the thought of that terrible waiting, of the sick suspense that could only end in despair, of the girl's probable future if she should not be found, haunted him. It was on his own impulse quite as much as in his pity for Mrs. Custance's distress that he left no stone unturned to trace her.

Norman believed that Mrs. Custance knew the whole truth. No words had passed between them on the subject except as to the means employed in vain to find

the missing girl, but as each day that brought his going nearer and found him more confident, hopeful, and courageous, found her quieter, paler, and more nervous, he ascribed such change in her as he was carelessly conscious of to that mental picture of Alice Eade by which he himself was haunted. He did not know that in the fearful shock of finding Caton dead all sense of the words she had heard in that listening moment at the drawing-room door had been confused for her beyond the possibility of application; he did not know that she never once connected the dead man and the missing girl; that Alice's disappearance was, in fact, only a background of dull pain to her in the days on which, for him, it formed the only shadow.

One by one those days went by until that morning came which was to be

Norman's last at the White House. It was a wet morning, and as he stood alone at the dining-room window waiting for breakfast, he looked out over the dreary garden and recalled the night of his arrival; recalled it with a bright, confident flash in his eyes, as the thought seemed to lead whither all his thoughts now led—to the future. How little chance there had been then of any future but one for him!

The light was still in his face, his whole personality was instinct with hope and confidence as he turned quickly from the window. Mrs. Custance had come into the room, and was wishing him a scarcely audible good morning. He did not notice that her voice was very low, nor did he notice that the hand he touched was as cold as ice. Her face, to his eyes, showed little change at any time. If, this morning, it was more

wan than usual; if the blue eyes were duller, the manner more uncertain, he did not see the difference. A certain blunted, dull expression which gave her face a look that was almost apathetic, would have been detected only by a very keen observer.

It was so usual with her to say very little that it escaped notice that during breakfast she said absolutely nothing. Norman was to leave almost immediately after; he had made all his arrangements before coming down, and as Dr. Custance left the room to give some orders, he rose cheerily and turned to Mrs. Custance.

"I shall always think kindly of this room, Mrs. Custance," he said. "We have had some pleasant mornings here, haven't we? I hope you'll miss our readings a little bit." He spoke with a good-natured sense of her very slight intellectual appreciation of the

readings, and he strolled to the window as he spoke. He did not see the blue eyes change for one instant with a flash of absolute terror, which left them, as it instantly subsided, duller than before. She was standing awkwardly by her chair facing him as he glanced round for her answer, and her appearance was as far removed from any touch of emotion as were her hesitating words.

"It has been very nice."

There was a moment's pause. Norman Strange's boot was apparently engaging his attention, and she stood still facing him, with the same apathetic face and fingers closely pressed together. The silence was suddenly broken, as he said abruptly, drawing nearer to her, and speaking rather low and quickly:

"Mrs. Custance, I want to speak to

you about that day at Sletton. I don't know, of course, what you heard when you came to the smoking-room, but I think you may have heard me take that whisky, and I should just like to put myself right with you as to the future. It's just as well, I believe, that I did not drink it, but as things turned out as they did I am very glad to have made the mistake then. It has shown me where to distrust myself, and forewarned is forearmed, you know. It won't occur again."

"You will — you will!' The words seemed to come from her under a resistless pressure of inward necessity, but she did not finish her sentence. Only the sudden intensity of appeal with which her face—from which all the dulness had passed as he spoke—was quivering as she raised it to his, spoke for her. As it had always done,

her wistful incoherence revived in him a sense of superiority and protection, and his tone changed from its gravity of explanation.

"Indeed I will!" he said reassuringly, almost lightly. There was another moment's pause, and then he changed the subject. "Mrs. Custance," he said gently, "I heard this morning from Scotland Yard. They have no news for us!"

The life died out of her face, and she paused a moment, as though she followed him with some difficulty, groping her way for the definite subject presented to her where all was vague distress.

"No news!" she said, "no news! Oh, poor Alice!"

"I will do all that can be done, Mrs. Custance," he said quickly, "and I will write to you. I shall go to Scotland Yard this afternoon. I——" He was interrupted.

"Strange!" called Dr. Custance from the hall. "We must be off at once!"

Norman turned to Mrs. Custance and held out his hand.

"Good-bye!" he said, the future even then holding all his thoughts. "Good-bye! I will find her if it is to be done. Don't be distressed!"

"Good-bye!" she answered him, in a strange, mechanical, far-away voice. "Good-bye, Mr. Strange."

The next moment he was gone, taking with him nothing from the old life to the new but the thought of Alice Eade.

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